三日間の幸福
三秋縋
メディアワークス文庫

三日間の幸福

三秋縋
イラスト／E9L

Chapter 1 – A Promise For Ten Years Time

When I was first told about how I could sell my lifespan, what immediately came to mind was a morality lesson from elementary school.
We were ten-year-olds who still didn't know how to think for ourselves, so the teacher for our grade, a woman in her late twenties, asked us something like this:
"You've all been told that a human life is something that can't be replaced, and it's more valuable than anything. Now, if it were given a monetary value, how much money do you think it would be worth?"

She then took a thoughtful pose. I thought her way of asking the question was inadequate, personally. She was silent for a good twenty seconds, still holding a piece of chalk and staring down the blackboard with her back to the students.
While she did that, the students earnestly mulled over the question. A lot of them liked the young, pretty teacher, so they wanted to say something pleasing that would get them a compliment.

One smart-aleck raised her hand.
"I read in a book once that the total life expenses for a salaryman are about 200 million to 300 million yen. So I think the average person would be somewhere around there."
Half the students in class oohed and aahed. The other half looked bored and fed up. Most of the students hated that smart-aleck.

The teacher managed a smile and a nod. “That’s certainly true. Maybe grown-ups would give you the same answer. One answer could be that the money spent throughout a lifetime is equal to the value of that life. But I want you to get away from that line of thinking. …I know, let’s do an allegory. The usual hard-to-understand allegory.”

No one understood what the… figure the teacher drew on the board in blue chalk was supposed to be. You could look at it as a human, or as a splotch of gum on the road.
But this was exactly her intent.

“This "Something of Unknown Nature” has more money than it could ever need. But the Something longs to live a human sort of life. So it’s trying to buy someone else’s life. One day, you suddenly walk by the Something. And when you do, it asks you: “Hey, you wanna sell me that life you’re going to lead?”… says the Something.“

She stopped the story there for a moment.
"If I did sell it, what would happen?”, an overly-serious boy asked after raising his hand.
“You’d die, surely,” the teacher flatly replied. “So you’d refuse the Something, for the time being. But it hangs onto you.
"Well, just half is fine. Wanna just sell me thirty years off the sixty you have left? I really need it, y'know.”“

I remember thinking as I'd listened to her with my chin in my hands, "I get it." Indeed, if it went down like that, I really might have felt like selling. I have limits, and it seemed apparent that a fat short life would be preferable to a long thin life.
"Now, here's the question. This Something who longs to live a human life must have assigned a per-year value to your remaining life, yes? …I'll tell you in advance, there's no right answer. I want to know what you think, and how you came to that answer. Now, talk with your neighbors."

The classroom began to buzz with conversation. But I didn't take part in any of it. To be exact, I couldn't.
Because like that smart-aleck who came up with the answer about lifetime expenses, I was one of the class stinkers.
I pretended I wasn't interested in talking about it and just waited for time to pass.

I heard a group sitting in front of me talking about "If a whole life is about 300 million yen…"
I thought. If *they* were 300 million, then…
I wouldn't think it odd if *I* were 3 billion.

I don't remember what the results of the discussion were like. Barren arguments from beginning to end, that much was certain.
It wasn't really a simple enough theme for elementary school kids to tackle. And if you got a bunch of high schoolers together, they'd probably bring sex into it somehow.

At any rate, I clearly remember one girl with gloomy prospects fiercely insisting “You can’t assign a value to a person’s life.” Yeah, if you were selling the chance to live the same life as her, I wouldn’t give *that* a value, I thought. Probably ask for a disposal fee, actually.

The wise-cracking clown you get at least one of in every class seemed to be thinking along similar lines. “But if I were selling the chance to live the same life as me, you guys wouldn’t even pay 300 yen, would you?”, he said, making the others laugh.
I could agree with his thinking, but it annoyed me somewhat how he was aware he would be worth much more than the overly-serious bunch around him, yet had a self-deprecating laugh about it.

Incidentally, the teacher said back then that there was no right answer. But a right answer of sorts did exist.
Because ten years later, when I was twenty, I did in fact sell my lifespan and receive its value.

I thought, when I was a kid, I’d grow up to be someone famous. I thought that I was ahead of the pack and excelled compared to others in my generation.
Unfortunately, in the little piece of hell I lived in, boring, hopeless parents who gave birth to boring, hopeless children were the norm, which helped spur that misconception.

I looked down upon the children around me. I had no skills worth bragging about nor humility, so naturally, my classmates were unsympathetic.
It wasn't a rare occasion that I was left out of a group, or that my things were taken and hidden from me.

I was always able to get perfect scores on tests, but I wasn't the only one who could do that.
Yes, so could Himeno, the aforementioned "smart-aleck."
Thanks to her, I couldn't truly be number one, and thanks to me, Himeno couldn't truly be number one.

So at least on the surface, we quarreled, or something like it.
We could only think of trying to one-up each other.
But on the other hand, it was evident we were the only ones who understood each other. She was the only one who always knew what I was talking about without misunderstanding, and maybe the opposite was true as well.
Because of that, ultimately, we were always together.

From the outset, our houses were nearly right across from each other, so we'd played together often since infancy. I suppose the term "childhood friend" would apply.
Our parents were friends with each other, so until we entered elementary, I would be taken care of at her house when my parents were busy, and Himeno would be taken care of at my house when her parents were busy.

Though we only saw each other as competitors, there was a tacit agreement to behave in a friendly manner in front of our parents.
There wasn't any particular reason, so to speak. We just thought that it would be best that way. Though under the table, it was a relationship of shin-kicking and thigh-pinching, as least when our parents were around, we were affable childhood friends.
But you know, maybe that really was true.

Himeno was disliked by our classmates for similar reasons to me. She was convinced of her own smarts and looked down on those around her, and since that attitude was so blatant, she was avoided in the classroom.
My house and Himeno's were built in a neighborhood on top of a hill, a long way away from any of the other students' houses. That was fortunate. We could thus use distance as an excuse to justify holing up in our homes instead of going to our friends' houses.
Only when we were hopelessly bored would we visit each other, reluctant and grimacing to imply "I'm not here because I want to be."

On days like the summer festival or Christmas, to keep our parents from worrying, we'd go out and waste time together; on days with parent-child activities and class visits, we'd pretend to get along.

We acted as if to say “We like it best when it’s just the two of us, so we’re doing it by choice.” I did think it was much preferable to be with my hated childhood friend than to force my way into the good graces of my feeble-minded classmates.

To us, elementary school was a place where motivation went to die. Often, the pestering directed at me and Himeno became a problem, and we’d have a class council.
The woman who taught us from fourth to sixth grade had an understanding of this kind of problem, and as long as it wasn’t too awful, kept us from having to call our parents about it. Indeed, if our parents came to know that we were being bullied, our standing would be set in stone. Our teacher recognized that we needed at least one place where we could forget about our cruel treatment.
But at any rate, Himeno and I were always fed up. So was everyone else with us, vaguely, since “fed up” was the only relationship we had with them.

The biggest problem for us was that we didn’t have good smiles. I couldn’t nail down the “timing” for when everyone smiles all at once.
When I tried to force my face muscles to move, I heard my very core being whittled away. Himeno must have felt similarly.
Even in a situation that should bring about an approving smile, we didn’t move an eyebrow. Couldn’t move an eyebrow, I should say.

We were thus mocked for being cocky and on our high horse. Indeed, we were cocky, and we were on our respective high horses.
But that wasn't the only reason we couldn't smile with the others. Himeno and I were misaligned on a more fundamental level, like flowers trying to bloom in the wrong season.

It was the summer when I was ten. Himeno carrying her bag thrown into the garbage dozens of times, and I wearing shoes with many a cut made by scissors, we sat on the stone steps of a shrine reddened by the sunset, waiting for something.
From where we sat, we could look down at the festival grounds. The narrow road leading up to the shrine was packed with carts, and two rows of paper lanterns ran straight like runway lights, illuminating their dim surroundings red. Everyone passing through looked cheery, and that was why we couldn't go down there.

We were both silent because we knew that if we opened our mouths, the voice would ooze out. We kept our mouths firmly shut and sat there, enduring.
What Himeno and I were waiting for was "something" that would acknowledge our existence and understand us fully. Since we were at a shrine surrounded by the incessant buzzing of cicadas, it's entirely possible we were praying.

When the sun was half-set, Himeno suddenly stood up, wiped away dirt from her skirt, and stared straight ahead.
“Our future is going to be really great,” she said in the transparent-esque voice that only she had. It was like she was stating a fact she only just realized.
“…About how soon a future are we talking?”, I asked.
“Not that soon, I think. But not that far away, either. Maybe in about ten years.”
“In ten years,” I repeated. “We’ll be twenty then.”
To us ten-year-olds, twenty seemed a really grown grown-up age. So I felt like there was some truth to Himeno’s claim.

She continued. “Yes, that "something” will definitely happen in the summer. Something really good will happen to us in the summer ten years from now, and then we’ll finally really feel like we’re glad to have lived. We’ll get rich and famous, and looking back on elementary school, we’ll say… “That school didn’t give us anything. All the students were such dunces - it wasn’t even any good as a mistake to learn from. A really foul elementary school,” we’d say.“
"Yeah, it really was full of dunces. It really was foul,” I said.
That viewpoint was rather novel to me at the time. To a grade schooler, their school is their whole world, so it’s unthinkable that it would have such things as pros and cons.

“So in ten years, we need to be really rich and famous. So famous our classmates will have heart attacks from jealousy.”
“So they’ll bite their lips from jealousy,” I agreed.

“And if they don’t, it won’t be worth it,” she smiled.
I didn’t consider that a consolation. The moment it came out of Himeno’s mouth, I almost felt like it was our guaranteed future. It echoed like a premonition.
Maybe we won’t necessarily become famous. But in ten years, we’ll triumph over them. We’ll make them regret treating us this way to their graves.

“…Still, it must be great to be twenty,” Himeno said, putting her hands behind her back and looking up at the sunset sky.
“Twenty in ten years…”
“We can drink. And smoke. And get married - wait, that’s earlier,” I said.
“Right. Girls can get married at sixteen.”
“And boys at eighteen… But I feel like I’ll never be able to marry.”
“Why?”
“There’s too much stuff I don’t like. I hate a lot of stuff that happens in the world. So I don’t think I could keep a marriage going.”
“Huh. Yeah, I might be the same.” Himeno lowered her head. Dyed by the sunset, her face looked different than usual. It seemed more mature, but also more vulnerable.

“…Hey, so,” Himeno said, looking me in the eyes briefly, but quickly looking away. “When we turn twenty and get famous… If, shameful as it is, we haven’t found anyone we want to marry…”

She coughed quietly.
“If that happens, since we’d both be left on the shelf, would you want us to be together?”
Her sudden change in tone proved her embarrassment, and even back then I knew it full well.
“What was that?”, I politely replied.
“…A joke. Forget it,” Himeno laughed as if to push it away.
“Just wanted to hear myself say it. Not like *I* would go unsold.”
That’s good, I laughed.

But - and I know this is going to sound extremely stupid - even after Himeno and I went our separate ways, I always remembered that promise.
So even if a reasonably charming girl were to show her affection for me, I would definitively turn her down. Even in middle school, even in high school, even in college.
So when I someday met her again, I could show her I was still “on the shelf.”
As a matter of fact, yes, I do think it’s stupid.

It’s been ten years since then.
Looking back on it now, I think maybe it was a glorious time, in its own way.

Chapter 2 – The Beginning of The End

After deeply bowing my head with an “I’m really sorry” for the 19th time that day, I had a dizzy spell, collapsed to the ground, passed out, and fell unconscious.
This happened during my part-time job at a beer garden. The

cause was clear; anybody would pass out working on so little food under a simmering sun.

After pushing myself to get back to the apartment, my eyes hurt like they were being dug out from within, so I ended up having to go to the hospital.
Having to take a taxi to an emergency clinic dealt yet another blow to my hurting wallet. On top of that, my boss told me to take some time off.

I knew I had to cut costs, but I had no idea what more I could possibly cut.
I couldn't remember the last time I ate any meat. I hadn't cut my hair in four months, and I hadn't bought any clothing since that coat I got last winter. I'd never even gone to visit anyone since entering college.
I wasn't able to depend on my parents, so I had to make my own money somehow.

Having to part with CDs and books made my heart ache. They were all second-hand purchases made after careful consideration, but they were the only things in my apartment that could get me any money - I didn't even have a computer or a TV.
I decided I'd at least give all the CDs another listen before saying goodbye. I put on headphones, lied down on a mat, and pressed play.
I switched on a blue-bladed fan from a thrift shop and

periodically went to the kitchen for a cup of cold water.

It was my first time taking the day off college. But no one would really pay any mind to my absence. They might not even notice I took the day off.
One album after another was transferred from a tower on my right to a tower on my left.

It was summer, and I was twenty. But like Paul Nizan, I won't let anyone say those are the best years of your life.
"Something really good will happen to us in the summer ten years from now, and then we'll finally really feel like we're glad to have lived."
Himeno's premonition was wrong. At least on my end, nothing good was happening, and there was no sign of good things to come.
I wondered what she was up to now. She changed schools in fourth grade, so we hadn't met since.

It shouldn't have been this way. But maybe it was good in a way. By not following me through middle school, high school, and college, she didn't have to see my transformation into a consistently average and boring person.
Though you could also think of it like this: If my childhood friend went to the same schools as me, I might not have ended up like this.
When she was around, it put a good kind of strain on me. If I

did something shameful, she'd laugh at me, and if I did something great, she'd curse me.
Perhaps because of that tension she made me feel, I was always striving to be the best I could be.

For the past few years, I'd been constantly having regrets to that effect.
What would ten-year-old me think of me now?

After spending three days listening to most of my CDs, I stuffed all but a few absolutely essential albums into a paper bag. I'd already filled another full of books. I lifted them both up and went into town.
My ears started to ring as I walked under the sun. I might have just been hearing things because of the irregular cries of cicadas. But it felt like it was right there in my ears.

The first time I visited this particular bookstore was last summer, a few months after entering college.
I hadn't yet gotten a good grasp on the geography of the town, so I was lost, and had to keep checking where I was walking. After going through an alley and up some stairs, I found the bookstore. I tried to go there many times afterward, but I could never remember where it was. Even when I attempted to look it up, I always forgot the store's name.
So the way it usually worked was that whenever I got lost, I'd end up there. Almost like the roads leading to the store

changed themselves around on a whim.
It was only this year that I became able to get there without getting lost.

There was a morning-glory blooming in front of the store now. Out of habit, I checked the cheap bookshelves in front to be sure there wasn't anything different on them, then went inside.
It was gloomy inside the building, with an overwhelming scent of old paper wafting about. I heard a radio playing in the back.

Passing through a tight passage by turning myself sideways, I called to the store's owner. The old man poked his wrinkled, tired-looking face out from between piles of books.
The old man who owned this store wouldn't show a smile to absolutely anyone. He usually just kept his head down and quietly rang things up.

But today was different. When I brought in a load of books to sell, he turned his head up and looked me in the eyes.
The man's face appeared to have something of surprise in it.
Well, I could understand that.
The books I was selling were the kind of books whose value lay in keeping them to read again and again. Giving them up must have been difficult for a book-lover to understand.

"Are you moving or something?", he asked me. It was a voice

that carried surprisingly well.
“No, nothing like that.”
“Well then,” he said, looking down at the piled books, “why do something so wasteful?”
“Paper doesn’t make for a good meal. Not very nutritious.”
The old man seemed to understand my joke. “Short on cash,” his mouth uttered, twisting.
I nodded, and he held his arms together as if thinking deeply. Then like he changed his mind, he breathed, said “It’ll take about thirty minutes to evaluate,” and carried the books to the back.

I went outside and looked at an old billboard on the end of the road. There were posters on it about the summer festival, firefly-watching, star-watching, and a book club.
From the other side of the fence, I smelled incense and tatami mats, mixed with the smell of trees - a rather nostalgic smell overall. Wind chimes rang from a distant house.

After the evaluation was done and I was paid about two-thirds what I’d expected, the old man spoke.
“Hey. I wanna talk to you about something.”
“Yes?”
“You’re hurting for money, right?”
“It’s not like it just started now,” I ambiguously replied, and the old man nodded, seeming to understand.
“Well, I don’t care to know how poor you are, or how poor you’ve gotten. I just wanna ask you something.”

The old man paused for a beat.
“You wanna sell some of your lifespan?”

My reply came a bit late, thrown off by the unnatural combination of words.
“Lifespan?”, I asked back, intending to confirm if heard him right.
“Yeah, lifespan. No, but I’m not buying. I know it sells for a lot, though.”
It didn’t seem likely that the heat was making my ears play tricks on me.

I thought for a moment.
A fear of old age must have sent this old man off his rocker - that was the first conclusion I came to.
Seeing my face, the old man spoke.
“Can’t blame you for thinking I’m joking. Or thinking this old coot’s gone senile. But if you want to entertain my nonsense, go take a look, I’ll tell you where. You’ll see I’m not lying.”

I heard out his explanation, all with a grain of salt. In short, this is what he told me.
On the fourth floor of a building not too far from here, there’s a shop that’ll buy your lifespan.
How much it sells for varies between people; it’ll be more if the life that would lie ahead of you is more fulfilling.
“I don’t really know you much at all, but you don’t look like a

bad guy, and I guess you do like books. Must have some value, right?"
I nostalgically recalled the lesson I heard back in elementary school, and thought how familiar it all was.

According to him, besides lifespan, you could also sell your time and your health at this shop.
"What's the difference between lifespan and time?", I asked.
"Not sure about the difference between lifespan and health, either."
"Dunno the details. It's not like I've ever sold any of it. But outrageously unhealthy people can live decades, and healthy people can suddenly die - that must be the difference there, right? Can't imagine what the deal is with time, though."

The man drew a map on a notepad and wrote a phone number for me.
I thanked him and put the store behind.

But I was sure this "shop that deals in lifespan" was only a fantasy of the old man's to make himself feel better.
He must have feared that death was approaching and come up with this notion of being able to buy and sell life.
Because, I mean, wouldn't that just be too good to be true?

My expectation was half-right.
It was certainly too good to be true.

But my expectation was half-wrong.
There certainly was a shop that dealt in lifespan.

After selling off my books, my legs carried me to a CD shop. The reflection of the sun off the asphalt was awful, and beads of sweat ran down my face. I was thirsty, but I didn't even have money to spare on juice from a vending machine. I'd have to endure until I got to my apartment.

Unlike the bookstore, the CD shop had decent air conditioning. When the automatic doors opened and I was bathed in cool air, I found myself wanting to stretch.
I took a deep breath and let the air soak into my body. The store was playing a popular summer song, which I suppose was still just as popular as when I was in middle school.
I went to the counter, called to the usual blond clerk, and pointed at the paper bag in my right hand; he looked at me dubiously.
His face gradually changed to something that seemed to imply I had severely betrayed him. A face that said "How could you let go of all these CDs?" Basically the same reaction as the old man at the bookstore.

"What kinda turn of events is this?", the blond asked me. He was a man in his late twenties with droopy eyes. He wore a rock band T-shirt and faded denim, and his fingers were always moving nervously.

Similarly to the bookstore, I explained how I had to sell my CDs. Then he clapped his hands with a “In that case…”
“I’ve got somethin’ good for you. Maybe I shouldn’t really be tellin’ you, but I’m real into your taste in music, bud. So just between us, a'ight?”
It sounded like it was word-for-word the kind of thing a swindler would say.

The blond said: “There’s a shop that’ll buy your lifespan here in town!”
“Lifespan?”, I asked back. Of course, I realized this was becoming a rehash of the conversation I had earlier. But I just had to repeat the question.
“Yeah, lifespan,” he confirmed with all seriousness.
Was it some kind of fad to make fun of poor people?

While I puzzled over how to respond, he explained, speaking quickly.
It was largely the same story as what the old man at the bookstore told me, but in this man’s case, apparently he actually had sold some lifespan. When I asked how much it went for, he dodged with a “Can’t really tell you that.”
The blond drew a map and wrote a phone number. It should go without saying that they matched what the old man gave me.
I gestured my thanks and left the shop.

The moment I stepped out under the sun, the heavy, hot air clung to my skin.

Just for today, I said to myself, inserting a coin into a nearby vending machine, and after much deliberation choosing cider. After holding the cold can with both hands for a while, I pulled the tab and took my time drinking it.
The refreshing soft drink sweetness spread through my mouth. I hadn't had anything carbonated in a while, so each sip made my throat tingle.
Once I had finished off the whole thing, I threw the empty can in the trash.

I took the maps the two clerks had drawn out of my pocket and stared at them. It was certainly within walking distance.
It seemed like I was in fact going to go to this building and sell my lifespan, time, or health.
I was being so stupid.
I rolled my eyes, balled up the maps, and threw them away.

But ultimately, I found myself in front of that building.
It was old. The walls were so darkened that it was impossible to imagine the original color. Maybe even the building itself couldn't remember anymore.
It wasn't very wide - I felt like it was being crushed between the buildings on either side.
The elevator didn't work, so I had to take the stairs to my destination of the fourth floor. I sweat with each step I climbed, taking in musty air, lit by yellowed fluorescent lights.

I certainly didn't believe the story about selling your lifespan. Rather, I considered the possibility that the two clerks were using some kind of metaphor to allude to a lucrative job they couldn't talk about directly - like it was "at the risk of shortening your lifespan."

There was nothing written on the door I found on the fourth floor. But somehow, I was convinced this was the place they had been talking about.
I stared at the doorknob for a good five seconds without breathing, then grabbed it with determination.

Through the door was a room unimaginably clean considering the exterior of the building. I didn't show any surprise.
In the center were rows of empty showcases, and along the walls were empty shelves - but somehow, they felt natural to me.
From a general point of view, though, it was a very bizarre room. Like a jewelry shop with no jewelry, an optometrist's with no glasses, a bookstore with no books.
Those are the kinds of comparisons I would make.

I didn't notice there was someone right next to me until they spoke.
"Welcome."
I turned to the voice and saw a woman sitting down, wearing a suit. She looked at me from under thin-framed glasses as if

silently evaluating.
I failed to find the time to ask “Just what the heck kind of shop is this?”, because she asked before I could open my mouth:
“Your time? Your health? Or your lifespan?”

I was fed up with thinking by then.
If you want to tease me, go ahead and tease.
“Lifespan,” I immediately replied.
I’d just let this play out for now, I thought. What did I have to lose at this point?

It was never anything exact, but assuming I had sixty years left, it was my estimate that it would be worth around 600 million yen.
I wasn’t as cocky as I was back in elementary school, but I still held onto the belief that I was worth more than the average person. So I thought I could sell for 10 million a year.
Even at twenty, I was unable to escape from the idea that I was “special.” That belief certainly wasn’t supported by anything. I was just trying to hang onto past glory.
I turned away from reality, which showed no signs of a turnaround, and told myself that someday, surely, I’d be such a big success I could write off these worthless years as never taking place.

With every year I aged, the scale of the success I dreamt about grew. The more cornered you are, the more desperate you are

for the tables to suddenly turn.
But this was to be expected. When you're ten points down in the bottom of the ninth, a sacrifice bunt won't do you any good. Even if you know you're more likely to strike, you have no option but to do a full swing and aim for a long hit.
Soon enough, I came to dream of eternity. I thought that unless I achieved such legendary success that my name would be known by all and never forgotten over the ages, I couldn't be saved.

Maybe for my course to be corrected, I'd need someone, just once, to completely deny me. With nowhere to run and no way to protect myself, I needed to be beaten until I wept.
Thinking of it that way, selling my lifespan must have been the answer.
Then not only my past life, but even my life to come would be completely denied.

Taking a closer look at her, the woman was pretty young. Just from her appearance, I would've expected somewhere between 18 to 24.
"Your evaluation will take about three hours," she said, her hands already beginning to type on a keyboard.
I thought there would have been some kind of tedious process, but it seemed like I didn't even have to give my name. Not to mention the value of something as irreplaceable as a human life could be known in just three hours.

Of course, that value was strictly something decided upon by them, not necessarily universal. But it was one standard.

I left the building and puttered around aimlessly. The sky was starting to dim. My legs were getting tired. And I was hungry. I wanted to take a break in a restaurant, but I didn't have the funds to spare.
Conveniently, I found a pack of Seven Stars and a hundred-yen lighter on a bench in the shopping district. I looked around, but didn't see anyone who might have been their owner.
I sat down, casually slid them into my pocket, then went into an alley. I stood by a pile of scrap wood, lit a cigarette, and took a deep breath of smoke. It had been all too long since my last smoke, so it hurt my throat.

I stamped out the cigarette and headed for the train station. My throat began to feel dry again.
I sat on a bench in the plaza and watched the pigeons. A middle-aged woman sitting across from me was feeding them. Her fashions seemed too young for her age, and the way she threw the food seemed restless; watching her filled me with a feeling I can't say for sure what it was.
Plus, watching the birds pecking the bread, I came to hate it for inciting my hunger. I wasn't quite *that* hungry, but I was this close to pecking at the ground along with the pigeons.

…I hope my lifespan sells for a lot, I thought.

Like most people do when selling things, I tried to low-ball my estimate of how much it was going to be until I saw the actual evaluation.
I'd initially thought in the realm of 600 million, but as if to avoid having to haggle for more, I tried to imagine the worst case scenario.
Considering that, I was thinking maybe 300 million. When I was a child, I thought I was worth about 3 billion - so compared to that, you could say it was a rather modest estimate.

But I was yet overestimating the value of my life. I remembered Himeno's suggestion of the average salaryman's expenditures, 200 to 300 million.
Though, when I first considered the value of life back in elementary school, and I heard that from a classmate with such gloomy prospects ahead of her, I thought "You couldn't put a price on the chance to live *your* life - I'd ask for a disposal fee!" That, I had forgotten.

I returned to the shop early and dozed off on a sofa, then was woken by a woman calling my name. It seemed my evaluation was complete.
"Mr. Kusunoki," the woman said - she definitely said that. I had no memory of giving my name to them, nor any form of identification. But they knew it, some way or another.
Indeed, this place must operate on something beyond common

sense after all.

Strangely, by the time I returned to the building, I was willing to believe this highly shady story about selling your lifespan. I could give all number of complex reasons for why that came to happen, but the one that stood out most was that woman.

Maybe it's strange to have such an impression of someone from the very first time you meet them. But… I felt like anything she was involved in couldn't be a lie.
With nothing to do with their sense of justice or logic, not even their quality, some people just hate wrongness. And that's the kind of impression I got from her.
But looking back on it, I came to realize maybe my intuition wasn't quite right.

…Let's get back to the evaluation.

As soon as I started to hear the word "three" out of her mouth, clinging onto a hope deep in my heart, I think for an instant my face lit up with expectation. I instinctively thought that my childhood estimate of 3 billion was right on.
The woman, seeing my face, made an awkward look and scratched her cheek with her index finger. Seemingly feeling that she couldn't tell me directly, she looked to the computer screen, rapidly tapped some keys, and placed a printout on the counter.
"These are the results of your evaluation. What would you like

to do?”

At first, I thought the number “300,000” on the form was the value of one year.
With eighty years of lifespan, that would be 24 million in all.
“24 million” repeated itself again and again in my head.
I felt like all the energy left my body. Surely that’s too cheap by any means?

I began to doubt the shop a second time. Maybe this was a setup for a TV show, or a psychological experiment. No, maybe it was just a nasty prank…
But as much as I tried to make excuses, it was futile. The only thing having a hard time was my common sense. Every other of my senses told me “She’s right.” And it’s my belief that when faced with something irrational, those are the ones you trust.
At any rate, I had to accept this number of 24 million. That alone took quite a bit of courage.

But the woman faced me and told me the crueler truth.
“As it turns out, your per-year value is 10,000 yen, the bare minimum one can fetch for lifespan. Since you have thirty years and three months remaining, you will be able to leave here with up to 300,000 yen.”

I laughed then not because I took her words as a joke, but because I couldn’t help but laugh at myself when faced with

such an awful reality.
And there on the form were my results, an order of magnitude below my expectations.

“Of course, this in no way indicates a universal value. This is strictly the result that is in accordance with our standards,” the woman said, as if justifying herself.
“I want to know more about those standards,” I said, and she gave an annoyed sigh. She must have gotten the question hundreds, thousands of times.

“The exact evaluation is done by a separate consulting body, so I don’t know the specifics myself. But I’m told that factors like degree of happiness, actualization, and contribution can greatly affect the value. …In short, the value is decided based upon how happy your remaining life will be, how it will make others happy, how many dreams are achieved in it, how much it contributes to society, and so on.”

The sheer impartiality knocked me down yet again.
If I *just* wouldn’t be happy, or *just* wouldn’t make anyone happy, or *just* wouldn’t achieve any dreams, or *just* wouldn’t contribute to society - if I would just be worthless in one of their categories, I’d be fine with that.
But if I wouldn’t be happy *and* wouldn’t make anyone happy *and* wouldn’t achieve any dreams *and* wouldn’t contribute to society… I didn’t know where I could look to for salvation.

On top of that, thirty years to go was much too little going on from twenty. I must come down with some major illness, right? Or get in an accident?
“Why’s my lifespan so short?”, I asked, thinking I’d at least try.
“I’m terribly sorry, but,” the woman said, lowering her head slightly, “I may not divulge any further information except to customers who have sold their time, health, or lifespan.”

I thought deeply, my brow furrowed.
“Let me think for a little.”
“Take your time,” she replied, but from her tone seemed to want me to make up my mind already.

Ultimately, I sold off all thirty years, keeping only three months.
My life of jumping between part-time jobs and the events at the bookstore and CD shop had built up a tolerance in me for getting raw deals.
While the woman had me confirm every detail of the contract, I mostly just kept nodding to everything without thinking. Even when she asked if I had any questions, I said not really. I just wanted to end this and get out of here. Out of this shop. Out of this life.

“You can perform a transaction up to three times,” the woman said. “Which is to say, you can sell your lifespan, health, or

time twice more."
I left the shop with an envelope containing 300,000 yen.

Though I had no visual indication or any idea of how it was done, I definitely felt like I'd lost my lifespan. I felt like upwards of 90 percent of something in the core of my body had left me.
They say a chicken can run around for a while with its head cut off - and I imagine it must be a similar feeling. Maybe you could have already called me a corpse.
I felt more impatient in a body that was all but guaranteed to die without seeing 21 than one I expected to survive to 80. The weight of a single second was greater than ever.

I had also unconsciously thought that "Hey, I've still got sixty years left" back then. But with three months left, now I was attacked with impatience - like I had to do something.
And yet for today, I wanted to go home and sleep. I was dead tired from walking around all over. I wanted to think about what was next *after* I was comfortably rested and could wake up feeling good.

On the way home, I passed by a bizarre man. He seemed to be in his early twenties, and walked alone with a smile that seemed to span his entire face, like he couldn't help enjoying himself.
It extremely aggravated me.

I stopped by a liquor store on the shopping district and bought four cans of beer, then five pieces of grilled chicken from a shop I stumbled on, and worked through both of them as I walked home.
Three months left. No point in worrying so much about money.

It had been a long time since I'd had alcohol. It calmed me down, but maybe it wasn't such a good idea.
I was feeling sick in no time, and spent thirty minutes puking once I got home.

This was how I started my last three months.
In almost the worst possible way.

Chapter 3 – The Observer With her Knees Up

On top of feeling bad enough as it was, it was a hot, restless night. Thanks to that, I had a very vivid dream.
Even after waking up, I ruminated over the dream in my mattress. It wasn't a bad dream. In fact, it was a happy dream. But there's nothing crueler than a happy dream.

In my dream, I was in high school, in a park. It wasn't a park I knew, but my classmates from elementary school were there. The notion of the dream seemed to be that it was some kind of class reunion.
Everyone was having a fun time watching fireworks. Their light colored the smoke red. I stood outside the park, watching them.

I suddenly noticed Himeno beside me when she asked - How's high school going?
I gave her a sidelong glance, but her face was blurry. I didn't know anything about her beyond when she was ten, so I couldn't really imagine how she looked now.
But in my dream, I thought that her face was absolutely stunning. I felt proud to have been acquaintances with her for so long.

Can't say I've been enjoying it, I replied honestly. But it's far from being the worst.
I guess that's pretty much my answer too, Himeno nodded.
I secretly delighted that she'd gone through a similarly miserable adolescence.

You know, thinking about it now, she said, it really was a lot of fun back then.
What "back then" are you talking about?, I asked back.
Himeno didn't answer. She squatted down, looked up at me, and said, Kusunoki, are you still on the shelf?

I guess, I replied, while keeping an eye on her expression. Checking her reaction.
I see, Himeno said with an amazed smile on her lips. Well, you know, so am I.
Then she added, with a bashful look, good. That's perfect.
Yeah, it's great, I agreed.

That was the dream.

It's not the kind of dream you should be having at twenty. I berated myself for what a childish dream it was. But at the same time, I wanted to keep it in my memory. I would regret it if I forgot it.
I'm certain that when I was ten, I didn't have much affection for Himeno at all. Maybe only the tiniest bit. The problem was that I couldn't feel even a "tiniest bit of affection" for anyone else since.
Perhaps that minuscule amount of affection was the biggest thing in my entire life - something I only realized long after she was gone.

Keeping all the details of the Himeno dream in memory, I laid in bed thinking about yesterday's events. I'd sold all but three months of my remaining lifespan at that shoddy old building. When I thought back on it, I didn't think, oh, it could only have been a daydream. I considered the event to be absolute reality.

I didn't, say, regret selling off the majority of my lifespan in the heat of the moment. I didn't, say, realize the importance of what I had now that it was gone. Rather, it felt like a load off my shoulders.
What had kept me bound to life thus far had been the shallow hope that something good might happen someday. It was a

baseless hope, but discarding it was a difficult task.
No matter how worthless someone is, there's no proving that good fortune *won't* befall them and allow them to write all that off as never having happened.
That was my salvation, but it was also a trap. Which is why now that I'd been clearly told "Nothing good will happen in your life," I could see it as a blessing.
Now, I could die at peace.

I said, if this is my plight, then I might as well enjoy the three months I have left. I wanted to spend them such that I could think, "It was an awkward life, but at least once I accepted death, I had a reasonably happy final three months."
First, I decided I'd go to the bookstore, read some magazines, think about what I should do next - but just then, the doorbell rang.

I was not expecting any visitors. I hadn't had one of those in years, and surely wouldn't in my last months.
Did they get the wrong room? Money collector? Door-to-door? Didn't seem like it could be anything good, at any rate.
The doorbell rang again. I rose from bed and was immediately hit with last night's queasiness. Hangover.
Still, I forced my way to the front door, and found an unfamiliar girl standing there. At her side was a luggage case that seemed to contain her things.

"…Who might you be?", I asked.

After giving me a stunned look, she pulled glasses out of her bag with a sigh, wore them, and gave me a “How about now?” look.
That was when I finally realized. “You’re the one who evaluated my…”
“I am,” the girl said.

The image of the suit stood out in my mind, so in casual clothes she looked like someone else entirely. She wore a cotton blouse and a sax blue dungaree skirt.
I didn’t see it yesterday, since it was tied up behind her, but her shoulder-length black hair had a tendency to curl slightly inward at the ends.
Looking at her eyes through the glasses she’d put on, they seemed to carry a certain sorrow somehow.
Glancing down at her thin legs, I saw a big band-aid on her right knee. It must have been a deep wound, as I could tell the state of it through the bandage.
When I first met her, I couldn’t pin her age down any more accurately than between 18 and 24, but looking at her that day, I figured it out. Maybe she’s about my age. 19 or 20.

But all that aside, why was she here? Actually, one of the first ideas that came to mind was that she was here to tell me there’d been a mistake in the evaluation.
They’d gotten a digit or two wrong. Or they accidentally mixed me up with someone else. I couldn’t help hoping that she had come to make an apology to that effect.

The girl took her glasses off, methodically placed them back in her bag, and looked back at me with emotionless eyes.
“I’m Miyagi. I’ll be your observer from today forth.”
The girl, Miyagi, lightly bowed toward me.

Observer… I’d completely forgotten. Yeah, she did say something about that.
As I tried to remember my conversation with Miyagi yesterday, I became unable to stomach my nausea, and ran to the toilet to throw up again.

Leaving the bathroom with my stomach emptied, I stumbled into Miyagi standing right by the door. Granted, it *was* her duty, but she certainly wasn’t a shy girl.
I tried to brush her aside, going to the sink. I washed my face, gargled, and took a swig of water from a cup, then laid on my bed again. I had a killer headache. And the killer heat helped foster it.

“While I explained it yesterday,” Miyagi said, suddenly standing at my bedside, “since your lifespan has been reduced to less than a year, I will be observing you from today forth. Therefore…”
“Can this wait until later?”, I interrupted with blunt irritation.
“Understood. Later, then,” she said. Miyagi took her luggage to the corner of the room, and sat with her knees up and her back

to the wall.
After that, she just watched me. Her intent seemed to be to observe me anytime I was in my apartment.

"It's perfectly fine if you just pretend I'm not here," Miyagi said from her corner. "Conduct yourself as you usually would."
But just having her tell me that wasn't going to change the reality of being constantly monitored by a girl no more than two years away from my age.
I couldn't help being uneasy, and kept sneaking glances Miyagi's way. She seemed to be writing things in a notebook. It might have been some kind of observation log.
The one-sided surveillance was unpleasant. The half of me she was looking at felt like it was being grilled by her gaze.

Indeed, I had received a detailed explanation about this "observer" business yesterday.
According to Miyagi, many of the people who sell their lifespans there become desperate when they're down to a year left, and start to cause trouble if they're left alone. I didn't ask for an explanation of what kind of trouble, but I could imagine.

Because one of the biggest keys to having people follow rules is their faith that they'll keep living. But if you have confirmation that your life will soon end, that all changes. You can't take that faith to the afterlife.

The observer system, then, is what was instated to prevent

desperate people from bringing harm to others.
Essentially, people with less than a year to go are observed, and should they do anything inappropriate, the observer will immediately contact headquarters to have their life terminated on the spot, regardless of their usual lifespan.
Which meant the girl sitting with her knees up in the corner of my room was a single phone call away from ending my life.

However - and this is apparently backed by statistics - once there are mere days before death, people seem to lose the will to bother others. So when there are only three days of lifespan remaining, the observer leaves.
For just those final three days, you can be alone.

I ended up falling asleep, apparently. My headache and nausea were gone when I woke up. The clock showed 7 in the afternoon. I'd call that a pretty awful way to spend the first day of the most important three months of my life.
Miyagi was staring from the corner as before. I was determined to do my usual thing, trying not to be aware of her presence.
I washed my face with cool water, undressed in my room, changed into jeans that were no longer blue and a frayed T-shirt, and went out to get dinner.
My observer Miyagi followed about five paces behind.

While I walked, the bright westering sun dazed me. Today's

sunset was a sheer yellow.
I heard evening cicadas crying from a distant thicket. Railcars listlessly ran along the track beside the road.

I arrived at an auto-restaurant along a former national highway. It was a wide building, and the trees growing behind seemed to loom over its roof.
Signs, roof, walls - it was harder to find a place that *wasn't* totally faded. There was a row of about a dozen vending machines inside, and in front of them were two thin tables with cayenne pepper samples and ashtrays.
In the corner were arcade cabinets over a decade old, whose background music helped brighten the place's desolate atmosphere just a little.

I put 300 yen in a noodle vending machine, then took a smoke while I waited for the process to finish. Miyagi sat on a stool, looking up at the single flickering light.
How did she intend to get food while she was observing me? I didn't suppose she had no need to eat or drink, but she had such an eeriness to her that I could accept it if she told me that.

She felt unusually mechanical, you might say. Not so much like a human.

After gobbling down tempura soba that was all heat and a cheap taste, I got a coffee from another vending machine. The sweet iced coffee spread throughout my dry body.

Even though I only had three months left to live, I still went and got unappetizing schlock from vending machines because that was all I knew.
Until very recently, splurging and eating at a fancy restaurant simply wasn't an option. I'd been living in poverty for years, and I must have lost a lot of imagination in that time too.

After I was done eating and got back to the apartment, I grabbed a ball pen, opened a notebook, and wrote out a list of what I was going to do next.
Though it was easier at first to think of the things I *didn't* want to do, the more I moved my hand, the more things that I wanted to do before I died came to mind.

Things to Do Before I Die

- Don't go to school
- Don't do any work
- Don't resist desires
- Eat some tasty things
- See some beautiful things
- Write a will
- Meet and talk with Naruse
- Tell Himeno how I feel

"I would suggest against that."
I turned around, and Miyagi was no longer sitting in the

corner, but stood right behind me staring at what I was writing.
She was specifically pointing at that last line, “Tell Himeno how I feel.”
“Do observers really have the right to probe and meddle with this stuff?”, I asked.
Miyagi didn’t answer that question. Instead, she told me this.

“…About Ms. Himeno. Circumstances led her to give birth to a child at seventeen. She then dropped out of high school and married at eighteen, but divorced a year later. At twenty, she’s currently raising a child on her own. In two years time, she will jump to her death, leaving a pitiful suicide note. …If you go to meet her now, no good will come of it. After all, Ms. Himeno scarcely remembers you at all. That includes, of course, the promise you made at ten.”

I had trouble dislodging my voice from my throat. I felt like the air instantly left my lungs.
”…You know that much about me?“, I finally breathed out, trying to hide how shaken I was. "From the way you’re talking… do you know *everything* that’s going to happen?”
Miyagi blinked a few times, then shook her head.
“All I know are the *possibilities* of what may happen in and around your life, Mr. Kusunoki. Of course, it’s all meaningless information at this point, as your future changed drastically when you sold your lifespan. What’s more, even those mere future possibilities I know are only the most important

events.”

Still looking into her notebook, Miyagi slowly raised her right hand and tucked her hair behind her ear.
“Ms. Himeno seemed a very significant person in your life, Mr. Kusunoki. Your life’s "summary” was simply filled with her.“
"That’s only relatively speaking,” I denied. “Like, it’s just that everything else barely matters to me, right?”
“That may be,” Miyagi said. “At any rate, if you want my opinion, meeting Ms. Himeno would be a waste of time. It would only spoil your memory of her.”
“Thanks for your concern, but it was spoiled a long time ago.”
“But you must still use your time wisely, yes?”
“Yeah, maybe. Can you really just talk to me about my future like that, though?”
Miyagi tilted her head. “Let me ask you instead. Why did you think I could not?”

I couldn’t think of an answer to that. Even if I were to somehow use future knowledge to cause trouble, Miyagi would just contact HQ and have my life cut short.
“We fundamentally desire that you have a peaceful end to your life,” said Miyagi. “To that end, I may predict your future and give you warnings.”
I scratched my head. I was wanting to say something back to this girl.

“Look, maybe you’re telling me this ‘cause you’re worried I’ll

get hurt and lose hope. But couldn't telling me be considered taking away the reason I'm getting hurt and losing hope? Yeah… Like, I bet you thought if I didn't hear the situation directly from you, but from Himeno's mouth, it'd hurt a lot more. That was pretty meddling of you."
Miyagi gave a tired sigh. "Is that so. Well, I had only good intentions. But if that is indeed the case, perhaps I did intrude too readily. I must apologize."
She quickly bowed her head.

"…But I will say one thing. You should not hope for much impartiality or consistency with regard to events to come. You have sold your lifespan. This signifies a leap into an irrational world that does not follow reason. And free will and choice are nigh-meaningless, for you took the leap of your own accord."
With that, Miyagi returned to the corner of the room and reassumed her knees-up position.

"That said, in this instance, having relinquished you of your, ah, "reason to get hurt and lose hope," I will refrain from meddling in any of the other items on your list. Do as you please, so long as it does not trouble others. I will not stop you."
Didn't have to tell me that, I thought.

I didn't overlook the fact that Miyagi had a somehow somber look.

But I didn’t give any deep thought into what that expression meant.

Chapter 4 – Let’s Compare Answers

Here, my buffoonery really picked up the pace.
I told Miyagi "Just making a call, I’ll be right back,” and purposefully went outside the apartment. My intent was to keep her from listening in to my calls, but sure enough, Miyagi was hobbling right behind.
It had too long since I’d called someone myself rather than being called. I stared at the name “Wakana” on the phone’s screen for a long time.
Summer insects made high-pitched noises from the thicket behind the apartment.

I was extremely nervous on the phone. Actually, it had always been that way since I was a child; I also never invited anyone over, nor started a conversation with someone out of the blue. True, I missed a lot of opportunities thanks to that, but it also allowed me to avoid an equal amount of worry. I’m not particularly regretful nor content with it.
I stopped my train of thought and used those few thoughtless seconds to press the call button. I just had to make the call. The actual conversation would be what it would.

The dialtone added to my nerves. Once, twice, three times. At this point, I finally recalled the possibility that she might not answer. I hadn’t done this in so long, I’d come to think that people would always answer a call.

Four, five, six. It didn't feel like she was going to "answer any moment now." Part of me was relieved.
At the eighth dialtone, I gave up and pressed the end call button.

Wakana was a girl from college, younger than me. I'd planned to invite her out to eat or something. And if things went well, I would have wanted to spend the rest of my short life with her.
At this point, I felt a sudden welling of loneliness. The first change I felt once the end of my life was made clear was an unfathomable longing to be with another person. I had a violent urge to at least talk to someone.

Wakana was the only person at college who showed me any affection. I'd met her this spring, at that old bookstore, when she'd only just entered the school.
Seeing Wakana poring through musty old books, I gave her a "move it, lady" look. But it seemed to trigger one of those common mistakes made when entering a new life - she thought "I don't remember this guy who's giving me that stern look, but maybe we met somewhere?"

"Um, excuse me… Have we met before?", Wakana timidly asked.
"No," I answered. "Never seen you until now."
"Oh, I see… Sorry to bother you," Wakana said, realizing her mistake and awkwardly turning away. But then she smiled, as if wanting to take a second try.

“So, essentially, we met in this bookstore?”
It was my turn to be a bother. “I think you’re right about that.”
“I think I’m right about that, too. That’s great,” said Wakana, putting an old book back on the shelf.

A few days later, we reunited at college. After that, we had a few lunches together, having long conversations about books and music.
“I’ve never met someone in my generation who’s read more than me before,” Wakana said with eyes sparkling.
“I’m only reading, though. I don’t get anything from it,” I replied. “I lack the ability to get the real value out of a book. All I’m doing is pouring soup from a pot to a little plate. It overflows from the sides, and it doesn’t make anything nutritious.”
“What are you talking about?”, Wakana said with a head-tilt.
“Even if it might not seem nutritious, and like you’ll forget it right away, I think the things you read always stay in your head and make themselves useful. Even if you don’t notice it yourself.”
“Well, maybe that’s true. I just think… I’m saying this because of the way I am, but I don’t think it’s healthy to drown yourself in books when you’re young. Reading is for people with nothing else to do.”
“Do you not have anything to do, Kusunoki?”
“Other than part-time jobs, not really,” I answered.
Wakana couldn’t hide a smile, and said “Well, we’ll have to give you something to do,” lightly slapping my shoulder. Then

she picked up my cellphone and added her contact info.

If I'd known at that point that Himeno had already gotten pregnant, married, gave birth, divorced, and by then had completely forgotten me, I likely would have been more romantic with Wakana.
But I was still determined in my adolescence to keep Himeno's promise, and ensure I was still on the shelf. So I never called Wakana, and while I did get a few texts and calls, they soon stopped. I can't get her hopes up, I thought.
The fact of the matter was, I'd always been a person who made himself difficult to save.

I didn't feel like leaving a message on the answering machine. I decided to send a text instead, telling her I'd called.
"Sorry this is so sudden, but do you want to go anywhere tomorrow?" It was blunt, but I was being careful not to ruin Wakana's impression of me. I sent it.
The reply came right away. I was unmistakably comforted by it. So there is still someone who cares about me.
I uncharacteristically wanted to reply right away as well, but then I noticed my misunderstanding.
The text was not from Wakana. Which would have been fine. But the English on the screen told me that no such recipient existed.

Basically, it meant this. Wakana changed her address, but

didn't tell me about it. It meant she didn't consider it necessary to keep communications between us.
Of course, it was always possible she'd done this by accident. I could even be informed about her new address very soon.
But I had a gut feeling what the truth was. That time had long past.

Miyagi seemed to have an idea of the situation from the hollow look I was giving the phone screen.
She briskly walked to my side and looked down at the phone.
"Now then, let's compare answers," she said.

"The girl you just tried to call was your last hope. Ms. Wakana was the last person who you thought may have loved you. I think that, had you made your move when she approached you in the spring, the two of you would have been getting on quite well by now. Were that to happen, the value of your lifespan would likely not be so low. …But you were a bit too late. Ms. Wakana has become indifferent to you. No, more than that - perhaps she has a slight grudge toward Mr. Kusunoki for ignoring her affections, and may even consider showing you her new boyfriend."

Miyagi spoke in a tone that in no way sounded like she was talking about someone right in front of her.
"Henceforth, there will *never again* be a person who comes to love you. The fact that you see people as a means to fill your

lonesomeness is much more transparent than you seem to think."

I heard happy laughter from the window next-door. It sounded like a group of college kids. The light from their window couldn't even be compared to the light from mine. I wouldn't have paid it much mind before, but now, it was piercing me right in the heart.
My phone rang at the worst possible time. It was Wakana. I considered ignoring it, but I didn't want to bother with her calling later, so I answered.

"Kusunoki, did you call earlier? What's the matter?"
She might have had her usual tone, but maybe because of the preceding conversation, I felt like Wakana was criticizing me. Like she was telling me "What's the big idea calling me after all this time?"
"Sorry, I called by mistake," I said, trying to sound cheery.
"Really? Well, true. You're not the kind of person who calls first, Kusunoki," Wakana laughed. Her laugh felt like it had ridicule in it, too. Like adding on "which is why I gave up on you."
"Yeah, you're right." I told her thanks for calling back and hung up.

The party next door got noisier by the second.

I didn't feel like going back inside, so I stayed where I was and lit a cigarette.
After two smokes, I headed to a local supermarket and wandered around, putting a six pack of beer, fried chicken, and cup ramen in my basket.
It ended up being the first time I spent any of the 300,000 yen I got from selling my lifespan. I'd wanted to choose carefully given what I gave to get it, but I just had no idea what I wanted to buy.

Miyagi carried her own basket and filled it full of things like Calorie Mates and mineral water. Seeing her shopping like that wasn't strange in itself, but I had difficulty imagining her actually eating the things she bought.
She didn't feel like she was particularly human, so a fundamentally human act like eating didn't seem to fit her.

Still… We must look exactly like lovers who live together, I silently thought to myself. It was a truly ridiculous - but happy - hallucination.
I even thought it would be nice if other people saw the same hallucination I was seeing.

I'll say it just in case - I'd long coveted the existence of a girl such as Miyagi. I'd secretly had a long-time desire to live together with a girl, and go shopping for food and beer while still in our loungewear.
Every time I saw a couple doing that, I let out a shallow sigh. So

even if her purpose was to observe me, I enjoyed shopping in a supermarket late at night with a young girl.
An empty happiness, perhaps. But don't judge, it was real enough for me.
Miyagi quickly finished up at the self-checkout before I did. We returned to the apartment together carrying our bags.

The noisiness next door was still going on, and I frequently heard footsteps through the walls.
To be honest, I was envious of them. I'd never felt that way before. When I saw a bunch of people enjoying themselves, all I thought was "What's so fun about that?"
But being made aware of my death must have corrected my desperately warped value system. I longed for companionship just like anyone else.

Most people probably look to family at times like this, I thought. Whatever the situation, you can always count on family for support, so it's the ultimate place to return to - I knew that was a common line of thought.
But "family" isn't a comfortable thing for everyone. I, for instance, had no plans to make any contact with my family in my last three months. Because I had so little time left, I absolutely wanted to avoid anything that would be sheerly unpleasant.

Ever since I was young, my younger brother constantly stole the affection from our parents. From the outset, he was

superior to me on all fronts.
He was honest, tall, handsome. From twelve to his present nineteen, he was never lacking a girlfriend, and he went to a better college than me. He even had good reflexes, and took the mound at the national high school baseball tournament.
I, the older brother, didn't have him beat in any area. I had a slow start, and he rapidly widened the gap between us year after year.

It's natural that attention shifts to the younger sibling, and I can't even say it's unfair that my parents came to treat me like a failure.
It was absolutely true that compared to him, I was a failure. What would be unfair was if we *did* receive equal attention from our parents.
I would have done the same thing in their position. What's wrong with loving the one who's worth loving, and discarding the one who's worth discarding?
There was practically zero chance that if I went home to my parents, I could live peacefully with their unconditional parental love. It was more likely that if I jumped into the party next door, they'd let me in.

While I ran a bath, I drank beer while eating the fried chicken. By the time the cup ramen was ready, I was already pretty drunk.
Alcohol really is comforting in times like these. As long as you know when to stop.

I approached Miyagi writing in her notebook in the corner.
“Want some?”, I invited. I didn’t care who it was, I just wanted to drink with someone.
“That’s fine. I’m on duty.” Miyagi refused without even looking up.
“I’ve been wondering, what’re you writing there?”
“A record of actions. Yours.”
“Ah. I’m drunk right now.”
“Yes, I can see that.” Miyagi nodded begrudgingly.
“Not only that, but I’m really wanting to drink with you.”
“Yes, I heard,” Miyagi said with a sigh.

Chapter 5 – Everything to Come

I turned out the light and kept drinking. Thankfully, today I was able to get drunk in a more peaceful fashion.
At times like these, the quickest way to get back on your feet is to not resist the flow of your emotions, but jump into a pool of your own despair and wallow in self-pity.

My familiar apartment began to feel a bit different than usual. With the moonlight through the window coloring the room a deep blue, the night summer breeze blowing in, and the presence of Miyagi in the corner staring like a sentinel, it felt like a much more eerie place than before. I didn’t know my apartment had this side to it.
I had a sense of being in the wing of a stage. Like as soon as I stepped away from here, it would be time for my performance.

All of a sudden, I felt like I could do anything. It was nothing more than me temporarily forgetting my lack of talent in my drunkenness, but I mistook it for something inside me changing.
I turned to Miyagi and proudly proclaimed:
“In my last three months, with my 300,000 yen, I’m gonna change something!”
With that, I finished off the last of the beer in the can and slammed it down on the table.

Miyagi seemed unimpressed. Raising her gaze a few centimeters at best, she said “Ah,” and her eyes dropped back to her notebook.
I paid it no mind and continued. “It’s not a helluva lot, but it’s my life. I’ll make it 300,000 yen that’s worth more than 3 billion! I’m gonna work to get back at this world!”
In my intoxicated mind, I thought it sounded pretty cool.

But Miyagi was apathetic. “That is what everyone says.”
Putting her pen aside, she grabbed her knees and rested her chin between them.

"I’ve heard at least five statements to that effect in my time. Everyone speaks of extremes when death is nearing. Particularly those who can’t say they’ve had a fulfilling life thus far. Under the same logic by which losing gamblers continue to hope for an increasingly unrealistic turnaround,

those who keep losing in life come to hope for unrealistic happiness. Many feel reinvigorated when the closeness of death reminds them of the sparkle of life, and they come to believe that they can do this or that - but those people are making a crucial mistake. They have only just arrived at the starting line. They have only just regained their composure after a long losing streak. Mistaking that as a chance to turn things around will do them no good.

"…So please, Mr. Kusunoki. Think of it this way. The reason your remaining thirty years were so lacking in value was because in them, you accomplished not one single thing. You understand that, yes?", Miyagi bluntly reminded me. "What can a man who would accomplish nothing in thirty years change in a mere three months?"

"…Won't know 'til we try," I argued, but even I hated how hollowly my words rang.
I didn't have to try anything to know that she was right on the money.

"I would consider it a wiser choice to seek a common, average satisfaction," Miyagi said. "There can be no recovery. Three months is simply too short a time to change anything. What's more, not doing anything can slightly prolong them. So don't you agree it's more shrewd to accumulate a number of small yet definite joys? You lose because you consider only victory. Being able to find victory in failure results in a minimum of

disappointment."

"Okay, I get it already, you're right. But enough logic already," I shook my head. If I weren't drunk, I may have tried to make an opposing argument, but I didn't have the energy for that now. "I'm sure I'm one of those guys who doesn't really understand just how useless he is. …So, hey, could you tell me everything that's gonna happen? How'd I spend those lost thirty years? Maybe if I heard that, I could stop having any unreasonable hopes."

Miyagi didn't open her mouth for a while, then spoke in a way that sounded like giving up.
"I suppose. Perhaps it is best for you to know it all now. … However, just as a reminder, you need not despair at anything I say. The things I know *were* possibilities - but now, they are things that will never actually happen."
"I know that. Just gonna be hearing my fortune, sorta. …And I'm never gonna go nuts over you saying one little thing. It'd only come to that if there were nothin' else to come to."
"I hope it won't come at all," Miyagi said.

There was a sound like the earth shaking. Like a giant tower toppling over. It took me some time to realize the sound came from fireworks, since I hadn't really gone to see any in years. They were always something I watched through a window. Not something I watched while eating food from a stand, nor

something I watched holding hands with a girlfriend, looking back and forth between them and her.

As soon as I was able to make my own judgments, I was a social outcast who avoided places with lots of people. Being somewhere like that felt like a mistake, and the thought of meeting someone I knew there gave me cold feet.
In elementary school, as long as no one forced me to, I never went to the park, the pool, the hills behind school, the shopping district, the summer festival, or any fireworks displays.
Even in high school, I still didn't come anywhere near prosperous places, avoiding what main streets I could when I walked through town.

The last time I actually saw fireworks being launched was when I was very young.
I want to say that Himeno was with me then, too.

I'd already forgotten how big fireworks looked up close. I similarly didn't recall how loud they were at that distance. Does it smell of gunpowder? How much smoke stays in the sky? What kinds of faces do people look at the fireworks with? Thinking of each individual detail in that way, it was apparent I really knew next to nothing about fireworks.

I was tempted to look out the window, but with Miyagi watching, I didn't feel like doing something so miserable. If I

did, she'd probably say something like, "If you want to see fireworks that much, why don't you go out and see them?" Then how would I respond to that? Would I tell her I'm too timid to handle everyone's eyes on me? Why was I still so concerned about how others saw me when I had so little time left?

As if to sneer at me as I battled my urge, Miyagi crossed in front of me, opened the screen door, and leaning out the window began to watch the fireworks go up.
Rather than being moved by the sight of something beautiful, she seemed to be admiring the sight of something unusual. At any rate, it didn't seem that she had no interest.

"Hey now, should you be looking at that too, miss observer? What'd you do if I suddenly took off?"
Still watching the fireworks, Miyagi sarcastically replied, "Do you *want* me to watch you?"
"Nuh-uh. I want you to be gone as soon as possible. Havin' you watching makes it hard to do anything."
"Is that right? Perhaps it may make you feel rather guilty. … Incidentally, if you were to flee, and make it a set distance away from me, I would have to conclude that you were up to trouble and have your life terminated. I would suggest you take care."
"What's a set distance?"
"It's not particularly exact, but I would say roughly a hundred meters."

That's something I wish she'd have said to start with. "I'll be careful," I told her.

A sequence of smaller sounds echoed in the sky. The display seemed to be entering its climax.
I realized things had quieted down next door. Maybe they'd gone to see these fireworks too.
Then finally, Miyagi began to talk. About everything that could have happened.

"Now then, about your lost thirty years… First of all, your life at college ends in a blink," Miyagi said. "You merely pay bills, read books, listen to music, and sleep - often. It gradually becomes impossible to distinguish one hollow day from another. Once that happens, the time flies by. You graduate college having learned nothing in particular, and ironically, you come to feel scorn for the time when you were brimming with hope.

"You know you should have accepted the reality back then - but unable to let go of the feeling that you were special, believing that this wasn't where you belonged, you could never get accustomed to it. You travel back and forth between home and work every day with vacant eyes, working your body into dust, and with no time to think, you come to enjoy drinking the days away. Your conviction that you will someday be famous vanishes, and you become someone quite estranged from your childhood fantasies."

“Can’t say that’s uncommon,” I squeezed in.
“Indeed it isn’t. It’s a very common kind of disappointment. Of course, the agony felt will vary from person to person. You, of course, were a person who needed to be superior to everyone. Lacking someone to depend on, you had only yourself to prop up your world. When that pillar crumbled, the pain was enough to set you onto destruction.”

“Destruction?”, I repeated.
“You came to realize you were approaching your late thirties. It became your lonely hobby to ride motorcycles around aimlessly. But, as you yourself knew, it was a dangerous hobby. Particularly for someone who has half given up on life. …The one small mercy is that when you one day crashed into someone’s car, you did not injure any pedestrians, only yourself. But a very severe injury it was - you lost half your face, the ability to walk, and most of your fingers.”

It was easy to understand the meaning of “lost half your face,” but harder to imagine.
Perhaps it was something dreadful enough that people would just look at it, and their only thought would be “a place where there was once a face.”

“As your appearance was the only thing you could rely upon, you began to consider going through with your last resort. But you couldn’t bring yourself to take the final plunge - you

couldn't let go of that last sliver of hope. "Even so, maybe something good will still happen." …Indeed, that is something no one can fully deny, but it is no more than that - it is simply a kind of devil's proof. That unreliable hope carries you to fifty, until ultimately, you die alone, in shambles and with nothing. Loved by no one, remembered by no one. Grieving that it should not have been this way."

It was a strange thing.
I was able to readily accept everything she told me.

"So, your thoughts?"
"Right, well. First of all, I'm really glad I sold off all thirty years," I replied.
It wasn't crying sour grapes; like Miyagi had said, they were no longer possibilities, but things that would now never happen.

"Heck, I think it might've been better to sell off all but three days instead of three months."
"Well, there is still time for that," said Miyagi. "You're allowed two more lifespan transactions."
"And you'll be gone once it's down to three days, right?"
"Yes. If you truly can't stomach my presence, then that is certainly an option."
"I'll keep it in mind," I said.

Honestly speaking, having no hope for my three months, leaving just three days seemed the more elegant way to do

things.
But it was still that devil's proof, the hope that something good might happen, that gave me pause.

The three months to come and the "lost thirty years" Miyagi told me about were entirely different. The future wasn't set in stone.
So something good *could* happen. There could still be an event that made me glad to have lived.
It wasn't a zero-percent chance. Thinking of it that way, I couldn't go dying yet.

Rain woke me up in the middle of the night. The sound of rain flooding out of the broken drainspout onto the ground was unceasing. I looked at the clock; it was 3 in the morning.
A sweet scent filled the room. I hadn't smelled it in a long time, so it took some doing for me to realize it was woman's shampoo.
By process of elimination, it was unmistakably Miyagi who had the scent. It led me to think that Miyagi took a bath while I was asleep.

However, it was difficult for me to accept that conclusion. I don't mean to brag, but my sleeping was light enough that you could probably just call it napping.
Even the smallest sounds like newspapers being delivered or footsteps from the floor above woke me up. It was unusual to

think Miyagi could take a shower while I was asleep without waking me even once. Maybe it blended in with the rain.

I decided to postpone working this out. I felt weird thinking about a girl I'd only just met showering in my apartment, so I stopped thinking about it entirely.
More importantly, I needed sleep for tomorrow. Getting woken up on a rainy night like this, well, it happens.

But it wasn't easy to get back to sleep. So as usual, I borrowed the power of music. I put one of my unsold CDs, "Please Mr. Lostman," in the player and listened to it with headphones. This is just what I think, but the kind of person who listens to Please Mr. Lostman on sleepless nights can't live a decent life. I used music like this to excuse myself from having to get used to the world.
Maybe I was still paying the price for it now.

Chapter 6 – One Who Changed, One Who Never Did

The rain continued into morning. It was heavy enough to serve as an excuse for not moving immediately after getting out of bed. Thus, I had time to think about what I should do next.
While I looked at my "Things to Do Before I Die," Miyagi approached and asked, "How do you plan to spend today?"
I was getting accustomed to hearing bad news out of her mouth, so I waited for her next sentence, prepared to not be swayed whatever she said - but that was all she said, just looking over my list afterward. It didn't seem to be a question

with any deep meaning behind it.

I took another look at Miyagi.
I'd thought this since I first met her, but her appearance was, in its own way, rather orderly.
Well, let me come out and say it. Speaking strictly of appearance, she was *exactly* my type. Refreshing eyes, gloomy eyebrows, tight lips, a pretty-shaped head, smooth-looking hair, nervous fingers, slender thighs - well, I could go on.

Because of that fact, ever since her appearance in my apartment, my behavior was thrown for a loop.
I couldn't even carelessly yawn in front of a girl who so perfectly matched my tastes. I wanted to conceal my broken expressions and idiotic breathing.
If my observer were the opposite of her - ugly, dirty and middle-aged - I'm sure I'd be able to relax more and think about what the right thing to do was.
But having Miyagi here made my overly embarrassed about my warped desires and miserable hopes.

"This is just a personal opinion," Miyagi began, "but do you consider that list to be the things you really want to do, deep down?"
"Well, that's what I was thinking about too."
"If I might say… I feel that you've made a list out of things which you feel someone *else* would want to do before they died."

“You might be right,” I admitted. “Maybe there’s nothing I really want to do before I die. But I feel like I can’t do nothing, so I’m trying to imitate someone else.”
“Still, I feel that there must be a method more suited to you.”
Leaving me with that presumably meaningful comment, Miyagi returned to her usual position.

The conclusion I arrived at that morning was as follows.
I need to correct my warped desires and miserable hopes a little bit more. I should think cheaper, more impudent, more vulgar, and spend my last months following my instinct.
What needs repairing at this point? I thought I had nothing to lose.

I looked over the list again, and then, preparing myself, called a friend.
This time, after only a few dialtones, they answered.

I left with an umbrella, but by the time I reached the train station, the rain had stopped - an event which seemed to perfectly define me.
Carrying an umbrella under a sky so clear that the rain prior seemed like a lie felt extremely improper, like carrying around a pair of skates.

The wet roads sparkled. I went into the station as if to escape the heat, but it was just the same inside.

I hadn't taken a train in a long time. I entered the waiting room, bought a soda from a vending machine by the trash can, sat down on a bench, and finished it in three drinks. Miyagi bought mineral water for herself, and chugged it down with eyes closed.

I looked up at the sky through the window. There was a faint rainbow forming. I'd forgotten that such a phenomenon even occurred.
Of course I should have known what a rainbow is like, when a rainbow happens, what people associate rainbows with - but for some reason, I'd at some point forgotten the basic knowledge that "they're actually real."
There was something I noticed, having a new look on it. I could only see a total of five colors in that great arching bow in the sky - I was two short of seven. Red, yellow, green, blue, violet. Wondering what colors I was missing, I mixed the colors on an imaginary palette, only then realizing the other two were orange and indigo.

"Yes, you should probably get a good look," Miyagi said from the side. "This may be the last rainbow you ever see."
"Yeah," I nodded. "And if we take it further, I might never use another waiting room, or this might be it for drinking soda, or this is the last time I'll throw a can."
I tossed the empty soda can into a blue garbage can. The sound of it colliding with its fellow cans echoed through the waiting room.

“Anything might be the last. But it’s always been that way, even before I sold my lifespan.”

So I said, but Miyagi’s statement had begun to make me feel a little antsy.
Rainbows, waiting rooms, sodas, cans, who cared about that.
But… How many more CDs would I listen to between now and when I died? How many books would I read? How many cigarettes would I smoke?
Thinking of it that way, I suddenly began to feel some vague fears. Death means the inability to do anything ever again but be dead.

After getting off the train, I went to a restaurant that was about fifteen minutes away by bus to meet Naruse.
Naruse was a friend of mine from high school. He was average height like me, maybe a little shorter, with an overly-chiseled face.
His head worked fast, and he could speak in a way that captivated people, so he was liked by his peers. It’s strange to think now that a social outcast like me was on good terms with him.

We did have one thing in common. And that was that we could afford to laugh off most things in this world.
In high school, we’d sit in fast food restaurants for a long time, making a mockery of all kinds of daily occurrences to the point of impudence.

I wanted to laugh at everything in that way once more. That was my first objective. But there was a second reason I wanted to meet him.

While waiting for Naruse to arrive, Miyagi sat in the seat beside me, on the aisle side. It was a table for four, but the seats weren't made very wide, so Miyagi and I were naturally brought closer.
Miyagi continued to observe me at close range. Sometimes we'd make eye contact, but she'd keep staring without paying it any mind.

That Naruse would mistake my relationship with Miyagi, who always dangled behind me wherever I went, in a way convenient for me - that was my hope.
I could recognize what an unbearably pathetic hope it was. But if I wanted to do something, I had to do it. It's sad, but that was the first thing after selling my lifespan I clearly thought "I want to do this" about.

"Hey, miss observer," I said to Miyagi.
"What is it?"
Scratching my neck, I said "Well, I have a request -"
I wanted to ask Miyagi to provide appropriate answers to the man who was going to arrive, but I noticed a waitress stood by our table, giving us a full-faced smile. "Excuse me, are you ready to order?"

Giving up for the moment, I ordered coffee. The waitress then started confirming the order, so I turned to Miyagi and asked just in case.
“You okay not ordering anything?”
When I did that, Miyagi made an awkward face.

“…Um, you shouldn’t talk to me in front of others.”
“What, is there something bad about that?”
“I believe I *did* explain this to you before, but… Well, you see, the presence of us observers cannot be sensed by anyone except for those we observe. Like so.”
Miyagi grabbed the waitress’s sleeve and shook it slightly. Indeed, as Miyagi said, there was no response.

“Any and all sensation I give to a person is treated as if it didn’t happen,” she said, picking up a glass. “So though I may hold up this glass, it is not as if she sees it floating. That said, neither does she see the glass suddenly disappear when I touch it, nor does she think it didn’t move at all - it just didn’t happen. I cannot be perceived as being "there,” but furthermore, I cannot even be perceived as being “gone.” …However, there is one exception. The lone individual who can perceive an observer is the person they observe. Troublingly, while I am essentially “non-existent,” I cannot be non-existent to you, as you’re already aware of me. …The point is, Mr. Kusunoki, that you currently appear as if you are talking to air.“

I checked the waitress’s expression.

She was looking at me as if I was a lunatic.

My coffee arrived a few minutes later, and as I sipped it, I considered leaving once I was done drinking, without meeting Naruse.
If he had arrived just a few dozen seconds later, I'm sure I would have done it. But before I'd firmly decided upon it, I saw Naruse entering the restaurant. I reluctantly went over and greeted him.
After he sat down, he showed exaggerated joy over our reunion. He indeed didn't seem to notice Miyagi beside me at all.

"Long time no see. You been doing good?", Naruse asked.
"Yeah, I guess."
Not the kind of thing for a guy with less than six months left to say, I thought.

By the time we were done telling each other how things were going for us now, we started to speak as if returning to high school days.
I don't concretely remember what we talked about, and the contents of our conversation definitely didn't matter.
We tore into everything, and that was our intent. Naruse and I said trivial things we'd forget immediately and laughed together.

I didn't say a word about the lifespan thing. I wasn't sure if he'd believe me, and I didn't want to spoil what we had going. If Naruse knew I had months to live, he'd probably at least act differently, try not to be rude to me. He'd cut down on the jokes, and become obsessed with finding comforting things to tell me. I didn't want to think about that nonsense.

Until *that* came out of his mouth, I'd say I was having fun.

"By the way, Kusunoki," Naruse said in remembrance. "Do you still draw?"
"Nah," I promptly replied, then carefully looked for the right words to follow with. "…I haven't drawn at all since I got to college."
"Thought so," Naruse laughed. "If you were still drawing, I dunno what I would've done."

That put an end to it.
I knew it was bizarre, but that exchange, not even ten seconds long, obliterated all the fondness I'd built up for Naruse over three years. All too quickly.
As he kept running his mouth as if trying to smooth something over, I spoke his name without speaking.

Hey. Naruse.
That's the *one thing* you can't laugh at.

True, I gave up on it. But that absolutely doesn't mean it's

something that's okay to laugh at.
I thought you would have understood that.
The smile I gave Naruse gradually came to have nothing behind it. I lit a cigarette and stopped talking myself, just nodding at Naruse.

Miyagi spoke from beside me.
"…Now then, let's compare answers."
I shook my head slightly, but she went on regardless.

"It seems you've just now come to hate Mr. Naruse a bit. But in truth, Mr. Naruse is not as fond of you as you believe. Originally, you would have met Mr. Naruse two years later in a similar way, and a minor thing would lead to a dispute, ending with the two of you parting. …You should cut it off soon before it reaches that point. Nothing good will come of placing your hopes in this man."

The irritation I felt toward Miyagi didn't come from the fact she insulted my friend. It also wasn't because I was told something I didn't want to know, and it wasn't because I couldn't stand putting on an expression I didn't actually feel. Lastly, it also wasn't my anger over Naruse sneering at my former dreams being irrationally misdirected at Miyagi.
Then what was I so irritated at, you ask? I wouldn't be too sure how to answer.

At any rate - Naruse in front of me prattling on thoughtlessly,

Miyagi beside me muttering gloomy things, two young girls on the other side of the aisle gabbing in shrill voices in a conversation that was more interjections than words, a troupe behind me talking about their opinions as passionately as if they were drunk, a group of students in the far seats clapping and shouting - suddenly, I just couldn't take it anymore.

Shut UP, I thought.
Why can't you just be quiet?

In the next moment, I threw the glass next to me toward the wall on Miyagi's side.
It made a louder crash than I expected as it shattered, but the restaurant was silent for only a moment before the noise resumed.
Naruse looked at me with wide eyes. I saw an employee running over. Miyagi was sighing.

What the *hell* am I doing?

I put a couple of thousand-yen bills on the table and all but ran out of the place.

While I took the bus back to the train station, I looked out the window, and an old batting center caught my eye.
I hit the disembark button, got off the bus, and hit about three hundred pitches there. By the time I put the bat down, my hands were bloody and numb, and sweaty to boot.

I bought a Pocari Sweat from a vending machine and sat down on a bench to slowly drink it, watching a group of men bat who I would think were coming home from work.
Maybe it was just the lighting, but everything seemed to be tinged a strange blue.

I didn't regret leaving Naruse like that. I was definitely doubting now how much fondness he really had for me.
Maybe I didn't really care for people like Naruse, but just hoped I could love myself through him, since he approved of how I thought.

And while Naruse had changed, I never did.
Maybe it was Naruse who was in the right.

I left the batting center behind and walked to the station. Once on the platform, the train came right away.
The train was filled with high schoolers coming home from clubs, and all of a sudden I felt old. I closed my eyes and turned my attention to the sounds of the train.

Night had already fallen. I dropped by the convenience store before returning to the apartment.
There were a few big moths in the parking lot, but they showed no sign of moving.
While I took my beer and snacks to the register, I noticed a college couple in jerseys and sandals were shopping there too.

Back home, I had a warm meal of canned yakiniku with added green onion and beer. Thinking how many liters of beer I'd drink before I die, it got a lot tastier.

"Hey, miss observer," I said to Miyagi. "I'm sorry for what I did earlier. I think I was just confused. Sometimes I just flare up and do things, y'know."
"Yes. I know," Miyagi said, her eyes looking at me cautiously. I couldn't blame her. Anyone would be cautious in front of a guy who throws a glass in the middle of a conversation.

"You're not hurt?"
"I am not. Unfortunately."
"Hey, I really am sorry."
"It's fine. Because it didn't hit."
"Wanna drink when you're done writing that observation log or whatever?"
"…You're saying you want to drink with me?"

I didn't expect that reaction. I guess it's best to speak the truth, I thought. "Yeah, I'm lonely."
"I see. Well, apologies, but I can't. I'm on the job."
"You should've just said that first then."
"Sorry. I just found it odd. Wondering why you would say that."
"I get lonely sometimes, like anybody. Surely the other guys you've watched have wanted companionship before they died, right?"

“I don’t recall,” said Miyagi.

Once I emptied out the can of beer, took a hot shower, and brushed my teeth, I was able to have a healthy sleep. It must have been my fatigue from the batting center.
I turned off the light and dug into my mattress.

Looks like I need to revise my view of things, I thought. As close as I was to death, the world wouldn’t suddenly get nicer. Maybe the world was only nice when it came to people who were already dead. That should have been clear, but it seemed I couldn’t get away from my naive thoughts.
Somewhere deep down, I was still hoping the world would suddenly get nicer.

Chapter 7 – Time Capsule Raiding

When I decided to write my will, I soon noticed that I couldn’t start writing anything at all without an assumption of who was going to be reading it.

Holding a pen over stationery I bought from a nearby shop, I thought about what to write for a long time.
Cicadas were stopped on the power poles outside, and they were noisy enough that it felt like they were inside.
While the cicadas were there, I could blame them for not being able to move my pen - but even after they flew off, I still hadn’t written a single word.

Who was I hoping would read this will in the first place? A will

is fundamentally a means of communication. I had to write to tell someone something about me that they couldn't see otherwise.
I asked myself, what did I have to tell anyone? Of course, I immediately thought of my childhood friend, Himeno. So should this will contain my thanks toward Himeno, or a confession of my love?

As a test, I took about an hour carefully writing a letter to her. To summarize what it looked like when I was done:

I don't know what you think of me by now, but I've kept loving you since that day ten years ago.
I survived until twenty because of my memories from when I was with you, and I won't survive beyond twenty because I can't stand a world without you.
Now that I'm about to die, I've finally realized that. In a way, I've already been dead for a long time. Ever since the day we went our separate ways.
Goodbye. I'm praying ten-year-old me survives inside you for a little longer.

Reading it again, I thought that I probably wouldn't mail this letter. There was a serious problem somewhere in there.
This wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to be saying with it. And it was impossible for me write down exactly what I wanted to say. I'd sooner die.

I think my desire came down to that last line I wrote. For

Himeno to still remember me as I was at ten for a little while. And if that was the objective of the letter, then it seemed I should maybe not write anything at all.

Any form would do; if it was just addressed to Himeno, and I was the sender, that would be enough. And that would result in the least misunderstanding.
If a blank sheet of paper seemed odd, I could write a single sentence: “I just wanted to send a letter.”
Or maybe - another option was to not talk about my death at all, but write about normal, everyday things.
I threw the pen onto the table and crumpled up the letter so Miyagi couldn’t read it, then turned up to the ceiling.

…At any rate, when was the last time I wrote a letter? I searched my memory.
Communicating with letters wasn’t a common thing, and since elementary school, I had no one to send New Year’s cards or anything like that. There must have only been a few letters throughout my whole life.
Aside from *that* when I was 17, the last letter I wrote was… in the summer of fourth grade.

That summer, when I was ten, our class buried a time capsule behind the gym. It was a suggestion from that same teacher who gave us the morality lesson that first led me to think about the value of life.
The students all wrote letters to put inside the round capsule.

“I want you to write those letters to yourself ten years from now,” she said. “Maybe you won’t be sure what to write, since I just said that out of the blue… I know, you can write things like "Did your dream come true?”, or “Are you happy?”, or “Do you remember this?”, or “What would you like to tell me?” There’s a lot you could ask. You can also write about your own hopes, like “Please make my dream come true,” or “Please be happy,” or “Please don’t forget about this.”“

She couldn’t have predicted that in a decade, some of those children had given up on their dreams, weren’t happy, and had forgotten a lot.
Maybe it wasn’t a letter for your future self, but a letter for you at the time when you were writing it.

She also said this.
"Also, at the end of the letter, please write who your best friend right now is. …Don’t worry too much about what *they* think about you. If it’s a case of "They hate me, but I like them!”, please just write it. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure no one else sees it, not even me.“

I couldn’t remember what I wrote to myself. I couldn’t even remember whose name I wrote.
The time capsule was to be dug up ten years later. That was this year, but I’d yet to hear anything about it.
It could have been I was the only one who wasn’t contacted,

but more than likely, they just forgot.
I thought that I'd like to read that letter again before I died. But not meeting with any of my classmates. Just by myself.

"How do you plan to spend today?", Miyagi asked as I stood up.
"Time capsule raiding," I replied.

It had been a year since I went back to my home town. After leaving the station, which was as shabby as a prefab hut, I was met with some familiar sights.
A town of green hills. The cries of insects and the overpowering smell of vegetation couldn't even be compared to where I lived now. Even straining my ears, all I could hear were bugs and birds.

"Surely you can't sneak into an elementary school and dig holes in the middle of the day?", Miyagi asked, walking behind.

"I'll wait until night, of course."

But while I'd gotten this far on impulse, I hadn't considered how I would kill time until the sun set in a town with no amusements or restaurants to speak of.
There wasn't even a convenience store in walking distance. It would have been time-consuming, but maybe better to take my moped.
As much time as I had to waste, I had no intention of going

home to my parents. Meeting friends was also a no-go.

“If you have time on your hands, perhaps you might tour some places from your past?”, Miyagi suggested, seeing right through me. “Places you used to visit often as a child but haven’t in a few years, say.”
“Places from my past, huh… It wasn’t a very good past I had here.”
“With the exception of Ms. Himeno, I assume?”
“Don’t bring up her name so lightly. I really don’t want to hear it out of your mouth.”
“Is that so. I’ll be more cautious henceforth. …However, while I don’t mean to be nosy, I would not advise meeting anyone.”
“Wasn’t planning to.”
“Good, if you say so,” Miyagi said, abating.

The sunlight seemed to pierce through my skin. It was going to be another scorcher. I sat on a bench outside the station and considered my options going forth.
Suddenly, I looked to my side and saw Miyagi applying what appeared to be sunscreen. I always thought she was really fair-skinned, and I guess she worked to keep it that way.
She was so overly serious that I expected her to be indifferent about her appearance, so it came as a surprise.

“Aren’t you invisible to everyone but me?”, I questioned.
“Essentially, yes.”
“Always?”

“Yes, I’m only seen by those I observe. However, as you are aware, there are exceptions. …For example, when you first visited the shop. When I am not on observer duty, I can be seen by those who are intending to sell their lifespan, time, or health. …Is something the matter?”
“Nah. I was just wondering why you’re fussing over your appearance if nobody can see you.”

Unexpectedly, Miyagi seemed to take this comment as quite an attack.
“I do it for myself,” Miyagi retorted as if hurt. “You would take a shower even if you had no plans to meet anyone, wouldn’t you?”
She really did seem offended. If it had been any other girl, I would have been rushing to apologize, but with Miyagi, I was glad I could get back at her. I wanted her to criticize my careless remarks.

While walking around wondering where to go, my feet led me to a thicket near my old home and Himeno’s. We played there often as kids.
I regretted how I was falling right into Miyagi’s suggestion. She illuminated just how boring and ordinary my actions were.
I took quite a detour trying to keep away from my parents’ house. I visited a candy store I used to frequent, but the shop had folded and the sign was gone.
I started on the path into the thicket, then walked off the trail for about five minutes before I reached my destination.

There was a broken-down bus there which served as a so-called “secret base” for Himeno and I in our youth.
The remaining specks of red paint on the bus looked like rust from a distance, but if you went inside and could ignore all the dust built up on the seats and floors, it looked unexpectedly nice. It seemed like it should have been crawling with bugs, but I barely saw any.

I walked around the bus looking for traces of Himeno and I. But as I went to leave after not finding anything and giving up, I finally noticed something on the driver’s seat.
Something was written on the side of the seat in blue permanent marker. I took a close look at it and realized it was an arrow. Looking to where it pointed, I found another arrow. After being directed around by six arrows, I found, on the back of a seat, what seemed to be an ai-ai-gasa. The silly elementary school thing where you write your name and the person you secretly love under an umbrella.

Naturally, it was my name and Himeno’s.
I had no memory of drawing such a thing, and only Himeno and I knew about this place - so it had to have been Himeno.
I didn’t think her the kind to do something so traditionally girly. Still, a smile formed on my lips.

I stared at the umbrella for a while. Miyagi watched from behind, but didn’t appear to be preparing any sarcastic

comments.
Once it was burned into my sight, I left the bus, and like I did as a child, used a fallen tree to climb onto the roof. Brushing away some fallen leaves, I lied down flat.
And so I laid until I heard cicadas ringing in the evening.

After visiting my grandfather's grave, it was night, and I headed for the elementary school.
I borrowed a shovel from the shed, went behind the gym, and started digging with a rough idea of where the thing was. The green light of the emergency exit dimly illuminated my surroundings.

I thought it would be easy to find what I was looking for, but either my memory was wrong, or it had already been dug up. I was digging for an hour, but all I got was a lot of sweat and no time capsule.
My throat was dry. My hands were getting really blistered, also aided by my time at the batting center yesterday. Miyagi sat by and watched me dig holes, writing something in her notebook.

While I smoked to take a break, my memory finally came back to me. That's right, we were going to bury it by a tree behind the gym, but someone mentioned that a new tree might be planted there, so we buried it somewhere else.
After less than ten minutes digging behind the backstop, I hit

something hard. I carefully excavated the round object so as not to damage it, then brought it into the light. I thought it might be locked, but it slid right open.

My original plan was to only take my letter and put it back right away. But after all that effort, I wanted to look through all the letters. A guy who's going to die in a few months should be allowed at least that much.
I picked one at random and opened it up. I skimmed through the "message to your future self" and the "best friend" part. Once I was done reading, I opened up a notebook, wrote the letter-writer's name, and drew an arrow pointing to their best friend.

After repeating this with a few more letters, the number of names and arrows increased, gradually creating a relationship chart. Who likes who, who's liked by who. Which are requited, and which ones aren't.
Just as expected, by the time I'd read all the letters, the lonely name on the chart was me. Not a single person had chosen me as their "best friend."

And… while I searched the time capsule thoroughly for Himeno's letter, I couldn't find it. Maybe it just happened that she wasn't there the day we buried it.
If she had been, surely she'd have written my name, I thought. I mean, she'd secretly drawn an ai-ai-gasa with our names in our secret base. She'd *definitely* write my name. Maybe added a

heart or two.
If only Himeno's letter were there.

Stuffing my own letter, which I'd found earlier, into my jeans pocket, I reburied the time capsule. I returned the shovel to the shed, washed my hands and face with the nearby faucet, and left the elementary school.
I dragged my exhausted body along the road. Miyagi spoke from behind me.

"I should hope you understand now? You ought not cling onto your past relationships. Above all, you've effectively kept none of them. After Ms. Himeno changed schools, did you send her even a single letter? After graduating high school, did you once contact Mr. Naruse? Why did Ms. Wakana abandon you? Did you show up to any class reunions? …Pardon the remark, but don't you feel that clinging to the past now is asking for too much?"

My face twisted, of course, but I had nothing to say back.
Maybe Miyagi was right. What I was doing was like not normally believing in any gods, but only going to shrines and temples and churches to beg for help when I was having hard times.
But if that was the case - with the past and future locked off from me, what was I supposed to do?

Back at the train station, I looked over the time table. The last

train had left a long time ago.
I never really took the train much when I lived in the area, but for such a rural place, I didn't expect the last train to leave so early.

I could have called a taxi, and it wasn't like I *couldn't* have gone to my parents', but I ultimately chose to spend the night at the station.
Think of it this way, I'd rather have my physical pain exceed my mental pain than the other way around. By hurting myself just enough, I could turn my attention to that.

I lied on a hard bench and closed my eyes. There was the unceasing sound of bugs bumping into the fluorescent lights. While I didn't think I'd be sleepless because of how utterly exhausted I was, with the strange lighting and the bugs loitering around my feet, I knew I couldn't count on a particularly pleasant rest.

From the bench behind me, I heard Miyagi's pen writing. I was impressed by her endurance. She must have not gotten much sleep at all in the days she'd been watching me.
It seemed like even during the night, she was in a cycle of sleeping one minute and then being awake for five. She must not have had any other option, but observer seemed like too harsh a job for a young girl.
Of course, it wasn't like I was sympathizing. I just wished she'd stop doing that job.

Chapter 8 – Inappropriate Acts

I woke up a few hours before the first train and bought an energy drink from a vending machine.
My body ached all over. It was still dim around, and I heard morning cicadas, crows, and turtle doves.

Back inside, I saw Miyagi sitting and stretching. That action seemed to show more of a human side to her than anything else I'd seen her do so far.
I looked at her, still holding the bottle. Perhaps because of what a sweltering night it was, she'd taken her summer cardigan off and put it on her lap, revealing her delicate shoulders.

…Maybe I was just confused.
Maybe it was having three months to live, maybe it was meeting one disappointment after another, maybe I was still half-asleep and fatigued and in pain.
Or maybe I really did like how this Miyagi girl looked, moreso than I'd expected.

Well, it didn't matter. At any rate, I had a sudden impulse to do something terrible to Miyagi. More bluntly, I wanted to push Miyagi down. I wanted to use her as an outlet for all my emotions.
What I was thinking of doing were inappropriate acts, ones that would surely get my lifespan terminated if I did them - but so what? I'd just die a few months sooner.

So I'd gladly die doing what I wanted to do. I *had* written not to go against my desires on my "Things to Do Before I Die" list.

I had previously considered her outside the range of those desires, but once I started looking at her that way, there seemed to be no one more suitable than Miyagi for that kind of desperate act.
I don't know why, but she seemed to stimulate my sadistic nature. Maybe since she was always acting stoic, I wanted to disturb the act and make her show her weakness. To tell her "You act so tough, but you're really this weak."

As I stood in front of her, Miyagi took a slightly defensive posture as if sensing my thoughts.
"I've got a question for you."
"…Yes?"
"Once an observer sees their target doing an "inappropriate act" or whatever, how much of a lag is there before their lifespan's terminated?"
Miyagi's eyes showed caution. "And why would you be asking?"
"Basically, I want to know how long it'd take before I got killed if I were to get violent with you right here."

However, she didn't look so surprised.
She looked at me with colder eyes than ever before, scorning me.
"I can make contact immediately. After that, it wouldn't take

twenty minutes. And escape would be completely impossible."
"So, I'd have about ten-some minutes to act freely?", I promptly asked back.
Miyagi looked away and weakly said "Nobody said anything like that."

Silence prevailed.
Oddly, Miyagi didn't try to run away. She just stared down at her lap.
I reached my hand for her.

I'd planned to insult her and hurt her, but as soon as I touched her bare shoulder, her sorrowful face made my body stiffen. Was I really going to push Miyagi down on the floor and use her to realize my desires?

If I did, she would surely be hurt. Maybe I would be adding another wound like the big one on her knee. Maybe I would take even more light from her nearly pitch-black eyes.
Maybe once it was all over, she'd just make a sarcastic remark as if totally unfazed. "…Were you satisfied?"

And would I really be satisfied?
What was I trying to do here?

My high-strung nerves were quelled in an instant. Instead, I was filled with an intense emptiness.
When I saw Miyagi's resigned eyes, it went so far as to make

me sad too.
I took my hand off her shoulder and sat next to her, leaving a seat's worth of room in the middle. I was embarrassed at how quickly my attitude flipped.

"Must be a nasty job," I said. "Having to deal with garbage like me all the time."
She continued to look away. "So long as you understand."
Now I see why I was worth 300,000 yen, I thought. I was a step away from doing something there was no taking back.

"Dangerous job. There's no shortage of guys like me, I bet? Guys who go nuts when they're about to die, and take their anger out on their observer."
Miyagi gently shook her head. "As a matter of fact, you are an easy case. There are many who go to much further extremes," she said, trying to preserve my calm.

I wanted to ask about the wound on her knee I'd been curious about since we met, but I kept quiet. It'd be like a slap in the face for me to try and show concern now, and only result in depression.
Instead, I asked "Why would you take such a job?"

"To put it simply, because I had to."
"Tell me the not-simple version."
Miyagi looked surprised. "I would have thought you had no interest in anyone but Ms. Himeno."

“That’s not true at all. If I didn’t feel some charm in you, I wouldn’t have tried to do what I just did.”
“…Is that right. Thanks, I suppose.”

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”
“Well, I have nothing particularly to hide in my past… Um, I already told you that other than lifespan, one can sell their health and time, yes?”
I nodded.
“Well, I sold my time. Roughly thirty years of it.”

…That’s right. I’d been wondering about that from the beginning.
What it meant to sell your time.
“I see… And if you sold your time, that means…”
“Indeed. Most of the observers are people who came to the shop like you and sold their time. Though by doing so, they effectively sold their safety and relationships as well…”
“So you were a normal human until then?”
“Yes. A normal human just like you, Mr. Kusunoki.”

I’d naturally assumed that Miyagi had been born indifferent, born sarcastic, born sturdy.
But from what she was telling me… maybe she was forced to acquire those traits to survive.

“You still age, right? So if you sold thirty years… once you’re free from the job, you’ll be about forty?”

“Indeed I will. Of course, that’s only if I survive to see it,” she said with a self-deprecating smile.
That meant she’d keep being invisible for decades to come.

“…Why would you need money that bad?”
“Lots of questions today, hm.”
“I mean, you don’t have to answer, of course.”
“What if I told you it’s not very interesting?”
“I’m sure it’d be more interesting than why I sold my lifespan.”

Miyagi looked up at the time table. “Well, there’s still time until the first train, I suppose.”
Then she began telling me the answer bit by bit.

“I still don’t understand why my mother sold decades of her time to buy more lifespan. As I recall her, my mother was always dissatisfied with the reality she lived in. My father evidently left just before I was born. She cursed him for every little thing, but deep in her heart I believe she wanted him to come back. Perhaps that was the only reason she wanted to extend her lifespan - to continue waiting for him. Of course, that would do nothing for my father’s lifespan, and my mother would become invisible to all. And most importantly, I can’t understand her reasoning for awaiting the return of a man who left so many wounds on her, never to go away. And yet if she wished to extend her life to wait for father - maybe it really didn’t matter who it was. She just didn’t have anyone else to

rely upon. She didn't know anyone who loved her but him.

"…I hated my miserable mother. She hated me in turn, constantly reminding me how she wished "*this*" had never been born. When she sold her time and became an observer, vanishing from my sight, I recall that I was only six. I was taken into the care of my aunt for the following few years, but there, too, was I treated as a nuisance."

Miyagi then stopped, her mouth closed in thought.
She didn't seem to be overcome with emotion or anything.
Maybe she'd realized her words were unintentionally sounding like a reach for sympathy.
As she continued, she sounded more disinterested than before, as if she were talking about someone else.

"My mother died when I was ten. It's unclear what exactly caused her death. However, it was clear she was killed by one of the people she observed. As much as you may extend your lifespan, injury and illness are another issue entirely. When I first heard it, I wondered if I wasn't being swindled.

"…The man who informed me of her death told me something else of importance. "You have a debt," he said. "An enormous debt your mother left. There are only three ways for you to pay it back - sell your lifespan, sell your time, or sell your health." My mother had sold nearly her entire life's worth of time to extend her lifespan, but died before she could work off the

time she sold. The debt thus passed to her nearest relative, her daughter. And if I could not pay it back on the spot, I would be forced to choose one of the three.“

"And you picked time,” I said.
“Indeed. I had to sell a bit more than thirty years of my time to pay back the debt. …And so I now work as an observer. It’s a lonely line of work with many dangers, but for what it’s worth, it has given me deep insight into people’s lifestyles and the value of life. Once I do finish paying the debt, I feel I would be able to live a more "proper” life than anyone. Thinking of it in those terms, it’s not such a bad job.“

She talked about it like it was her salvation.
But no matter how I looked at it, Miyagi’s life was sheer tragedy.

"I don’t get it,” I said. “I think I’d just sell off a life like that. ‘Cause there’s no guarantee you’ll survive to pay off the debt, is there? And your mother’s dead. Even if you do make it to the end, the best times of your life will be over. I don’t mean to be ironic or anything, but I’m gonna borrow your words - you’ve only just hit the starting line. Having to deal with all this pain and then starting your life at forty… I just call that a tragedy. So it’d be better to sell it.”

“If my lifespan were worth anything, I would.”
“What’s it worth?”

“The same as yours,” Miyagi said, like it was funny. “10,000 yen a year. …If I’ve been overly harsh with you, I believe it’s because I can’t accept having such little value. In some ways, we are similar. So I apologize for taking it out on you.”

“…Well, I don’t wanna be rude, but wouldn’t it be better to just die already?”, I asked. “There’s less and less to look forward to.”

“Yes, you’re right. You’re absolutely right. And yet I suppose I can’t do so because I take after my mother. I’m a hopeless fool. There’s no point in living, yet I’m compelled to live longer. Perhaps we may be the same even down to the way we die. But… You see, it’s not that simple. Perhaps something good will happen someday.”

"I know a guy who died at fifty saying that to himself but getting nothing out of it,” I joked.
“So do I,” Miyagi smirked.

Smiling with her, I lit a cigarette. Then Miyagi stood up, took another cigarette from my hand, and put it in her mouth. She held a lighter up to light it, but it seemed to have just run out of oil, the flint never sparking on repeated attempts. Miyagi pointed to my cigarette and brought her face close. I followed her signal and did the same. The ends touched, and the flame was slowly transferred to Miyagi’s.

Seeing Miyagi relaxing for the first time, I thought:

I'll at least make her remember me as the easiest subject to be around.

I looked across the tracks. The sun was starting to rise.

Chapter 9 – Too Good to Be True

For the few days to follow, I was obedient. I didn't go out except to eat, and keeping myself to a small area, I just kept folding paper cranes with a ton of origami paper I bought from the stationery store.

Looking at all the cranes lined up on the table, Miyagi asked,
"Are you making a thousand-crane chain?"
"Yep. As you can see."
Miyagi picked up a blue one from among the dozens, pinching it by both wings, and looked at it with interest. "You intend to do so all by yourself? For what?"
"To wish for a happy life before I die," I answered.

I enjoyed the pointless work. I filled the apartment with colorful paper cranes. Pink cranes, red cranes, orange cranes, yellow cranes, yellow-green cranes, green cranes, light blue cranes, sky blue cranes, violet cranes.
The cranes flooded off the table, and would be blown all over the floor by the slowly-turning fan, coloring the dull room.
I felt a slight sense of satisfaction looking at them. Is there a more pure wish than to do something pointless yet beautiful?

While folding cranes, I had the urge to talk to Miyagi many times, but I tried to start as few conversations with her as possible. I felt that I didn't want to rely on her. That didn't seem like the right way to give her relief.
But meanwhile, Miyagi's attitude toward me softened. When we met eyes, she actually looked at me. Rather than looking at me like an object, I'd say she was much more warm than before.
Maybe she'd opened her heart to me in our conversation at the station. Or maybe observers are simply instructed to be nicer as their subjects' lifespans dwindle.
In any event, she was with me for the purposes of her job. If I were to forget that, it would surely come back to bite me.

After five days, the task was finally done. While I went through recounting them, I found many cranes that were too good to believe I made them.
These ones must have been folded by a certain nosy individual while I slept.
I ran a string through the thousand cranes, and hung my completed creation from the ceiling.

Now, let's talk about the letter.

The night I finished folding the cranes, I checked the pockets of my jeans before washing them and found a crumpled letter. It was the letter to myself ten years in the future. I'd left it in

my pocket since the day I dug up the time capsule.
I turned the jeans inside-out and put them in the washing machine, then re-read the letter which I'd only skimmed before.
This is what it said.

To me ten years from now:

You're the only one I can count on to do this.
If I'm still on the shelf in ten years, I want you to meet Himeno.
Because Himeno's hopeless without me,
and I'm hopeless without Himeno.

I dared to show the letter to Miyagi.
"You were surprisingly honest and kind ten years ago," she remarked after reading, impressed. "So then, what do you intend to do?"

"Go meet Himeno," I replied. "I'm starting to realize how foolish and pointless that is. I can definitely acknowledge how stupid it is to still be attached to a childhood friend I haven't seen in a decade. But this is a request from *myself*. I made it ten years ago to me right now, and I want to respect it. Sure, it might bring me more pain. I might be even more disappointed. But until I see it with my own eyes, I can't give up.

"…I want to talk with her just one more time. And as thanks for giving me my life, I want to give her the 300,000 yen from

selling it. Even if I've already spent some of it. You might be opposed, but I don't care. It's my lifespan, and my money."
"I won't stop you," Miyagi said. "I can't say I don't understand the feeling myself."

I hadn't expected Miyagi to agree so easily, so I stumbled briefly. I also didn't think on the significance of her words. But later I would think back on them, and realize their true meaning.
Miyagi didn't just "understand" the feeling. She knew it. Long before I did.

"I'm thinking of going to Himeno's house, tomorrow, even. You know if she's at her parents'?"
"Indeed. It seems she's been depending on them ever since her husband left."
After saying that, Miyagi turned her eyes up as observing my face. She was hesitant to talk about Himeno in front of me. Worrying I'd get irrationally irritated.
I uncharacteristically told her "Thanks."
"Don't mention it," Miyagi said with relief.

To explain how I knew where Himeno lived after changing schools, first I'd have to talk about the single letter I received from Himeno in the summer, when I was 17.
I felt an indescribable feeling of wrongness after reading it. This doesn't seem like something she'd write, I thought.

It was filled with frivolous things. About how she was too busy with studies to even have time to read, about how she'd had to find numerous gaps between homework to even write this letter, about the college she hoped to go to, about how she might come visit on winter break.
It really seemed like the kind of things a 10-year-old girl would write, but in the handwriting of a 17-year-old girl.
And that was what was so strange. If this were your ordinary 17-year-old girl, then no problem. But this was Himeno. The girl who was, unlike me, supposed to remain far away from "average."

Yet I couldn't find a hint of sarcasm or an insulting word.
What did it mean? Where did the distorted Himeno I knew go?
Would a person change that much after turning 17?
Or was it simply that, despite how she talked, she always wrote like she was an ordinary girl?

Unable to find a satisfactory answer to my doubts, two weeks later, I sent a reply rather similar in content to the letter I'd received.
About how I had been too busy studying for exams to write a reply myself, about the college I was hoping to go to, and about how I would be glad if Himeno did visit.
I patiently waited for a reply, but after a week, after a month, there were no further letters from Himeno.
Himeno didn't come visit over winter break, either.

Had I made some kind of mistake? At the time, I'd simply written my honest feelings about wanting to meet Himeno. Maybe I didn't write it very well, was my thought then. But… by then, Himeno was already carrying the child of someone I didn't even know. The child of someone she married at 18, then divorced a year later.

Looking back on it like this, I can't say it was a good memory. But the letter she sent did tell me where she was. I was glad for that now.

Though I'd intended to never go to school again, I needed to borrow a computer at the university library to know Himeno's exact location.
As I put the key in my moped and put my foot on the kick pedal, I remembered something Miyagi said.

"Oh yeah, I can't go more than 100 meters from you, huh."
"Indeed," Miyagi confirmed. "Apologies, but I can't let you go too far on your own. …Though this bike does seat two, does it not?"
"I guess it *can*," I said. The second-hand Cub 110 I bought for commuting to school had a tandem seat instead of a rear carrier. I didn't have a spare helmet, but nobody could see Miyagi, so it wasn't like anyone would stop us.
"Then it will be possible to use this. As long as you aren't

vehemently opposed to me riding."
"No way. Don't worry about it."
I started the engine and pointed behind me. Miyagi said "Pardon me" and sat in the tandem seat, wrapping her arms around my stomach.

I took the usual roads at a slower speed than usual. It was a pleasant, nostalgic morning.
While going down a long straight road, I noticed a tall tower of clouds in the sky.
I felt like I could see the outlines of things more clearly, but they also looked more hollow.

The campus, which I hadn't visited in many days now, felt unusually cold and distant. The students walking around seemed like happy creatures living in a totally different world. Even the rare unhappy person I passed by seemed to be relishing their unhappiness.
After printing out a map and putting it in my bag, I left the library. The shops weren't open yet, so I bought anpan and drip coffee from the vending machines, and had breakfast in the lounge. Miyagi bought donuts and chewed on those.

"Hey, this isn't really a meaningful question, but if you were in my situation, how would you spend your last few months?", I asked Miyagi.
"Hmm… I don't think I'd know until I was in that position," she replied, then looked around her. "Um, I know I told you

before, but you shouldn't talk to me in places like this. They'll think you're a strange guy who talks to himself."
"Let 'em. I am a strange guy."

Indeed, the people in the lounge were looking at me warily as I talked to empty space.
But I didn't mind. In fact, I wanted to be actively weird. Better to remembered as a weirdo than not remembered at all, I suppose I thought.

When I stood up after finishing breakfast, Miyagi came up beside me.
"Um, I've been thinking. About the answer to that question you asked. It… may be too serious a response, but if I were in the situation of having a few months left to live, there are three things I would absolutely want to do."
"Ooh, I'd love to hear them."
"Though I doubt they will be of use to you," Miyagi clarified.
"…First, to go to a certain lake. Second, to make a grave for myself. And third, to go see the person who was important to me, as you're doing."

"I don't know if I get it. How about a little more info?"
"The lake is… just a lake. However, I do remember looking at an incredible starry sky there. It may be one of the most beautiful sights I've seen among my shabby life experiences. There are no doubt more beautiful sights in the world, but as far as those I "know," that starry lake is the most."

"I see. …And the grave, you wanna make sure you buy a piece of land?"
“No. Strictly speaking, it would be fine if I just randomly found a large rock and decided "This is my grave.” What’s important is that whatever I decide to be my grave remains for at least a couple decades. …And about the “person who was important to me”…“ Miyagi looked down. "Well, I’d rather not tell you, Mr. Kusunoki.”
“Huh. Suppose it’s a guy?”
“Well, you would suppose right.”
She evidently didn’t want to go any deeper.

I thought. A person who was important to Miyagi. Well, she became an observer at ten. And by someone who “was once” important to her, she was probably talking about someone from before that.
“I think, as much as it might hurt me, as much as I might be disappointed, I would still ultimately go to meet them. Which of course means I have no right to deny what you’re doing, Mr. Kusunoki.”
“That doesn’t seem like you. A lot more timid when it’s you, huh?”, I laughed.
“Well, I don’t know anything about my own future,” Miyagi said.

I found Himeno’s house so easily, I did a double-take.

At first, I simply couldn't believe it was her house. I initially suspected it was for some other family with the same last name, but there were no other "Himeno" houses in the area. That was no doubt where Himeno lived.

Before she changed schools, Himeno lived in a fabulous Japanese-style house which to my childlike mind seemed perfectly fitting for a girl with "princess" in her name.
But the place I found with the map was a seedy-looking dwelling with so little personality, you'd forget it if you looked away for five seconds.

I didn't hesitate as I pushed the doorbell because I still had the faint impression that she wasn't there. I rang the doorbell three times three minutes apart, but no one came to the door. I thought that if I waited until night, someone might come home, so I decided to waste some time in the area. I looked at the map I printed out at school to look for places to spend time until night fell.
"Public library" caught my eye. Ever since I visited the school library this morning, a faint desire to read had been bubbling up in me.

It looked like a neat little library on the outside, but one step inside told me it was a horribly old place.
It had a strong smell, and was dirty like an abandoned school building. But the books were arranged all right.

I'd been thinking about what sorts of books I'd like to read before I died. Or put otherwise, "what kind of book could possibly be useful right before death?"
I figured I would only read those books. I didn't want to read one that had essentially lost its value at this point and regretfully think, "What was so enjoyable about reading this?"

Maybe it would have been different a month later. But then, my choices were Paul Auster, Kenji Miyazawa, O. Henry, and Hemingway. Not particularly interesting picks.
All the books I took were short ones, probably not because I necessarily liked those better, but because I just didn't want to read any long stories. I was unsure if I had the energy to tackle a story longer than a certain length.

While I sat reading O. Henry's The Gift of the Magi, Miyagi moved from sitting in front of me and watching to beside me, and looked at the page I was on.
"Wanting to try observing and reading at the same time?", I asked in a whisper.
"Something like that," Miyagi said, coming closer.
She sure does have a calming smell to her, I thought.

I read until the library closed at 6 PM. Sometimes I'd go outside to rest my eyes and smoke in the smoking area.
It was my first experience reading a book with someone else. It seemed like more enriching reading that way, since I wasn't just thinking about how I felt, but how Miyagi felt reading the

same part.

We headed back for Himeno's house, but still no one came when I rang the doorbell. Fully aware of what the neighbors must have thought, I waited in front of Himeno's house for someone to come for about an hour.
The sun set, and the safety lights on the power poles came on. Cigarette butts piled up by my feet. Miyagi looked at them disapprovingly, so I took a portable ashtray out of my bag and collected them.

It seemed best to call it a day and try again some other time. I couldn't deny that I was partly relieved that Himeno didn't show up.

We apparently took a wrong turn on the way back, and ended up in a shopping district lined with paper lanterns. It took a while for me to realize it was right near my parents' house, since I'd never come down this way before.
There seemed to be a summer festival going on at the shrine up ahead. I was just starting to feel hungry, so I stopped the Cub in a parking lot and went walking through the sauce-scented stands, looking for something good to eat.

I hadn't seen such a festival in ten years. I'd stopped going to the local one since Himeno left.
It was a small festival, with only ten to fifteen stands. But it had its own kind of liveliness. The fewer amusements in an

area, the more excited people get.

Everything went to plan up to me buying sukiyaki and a frankfurter, but after that, stricken by some madness, I decided to buy something from every stand.
I bought octopus dumplings, shaved ice, broiled sweet corn, usuyaki, deep-fried chicken, a candy apple, a chocolate banana, grilled chicken, grilled squid, and tropical juice, and took them all to the stone steps.

“What are you doing buying all that?”, Miyagi asked, shocked.
“Fulfilling a boyish dream. There’s no way I can eat this all myself, so you’ll have to help.”
I started working through them. Miyagi hesitantly reached into my bag and began eating the usuyaki.

By the time we’d partaken in all twelve items, Miyagi and I were deeply fed up with the smell of food. We both had pretty small stomachs, after all; it was like trying to fit a volleyball in there.
Overly full, we didn’t feel like standing up for a while. Miyagi licked the candy apple with a standoffish look.

From where we sat, we could look down at the festival grounds. The narrow road leading up to the shrine was packed with carts, and two rows of paper lanterns ran straight like runway lights, illuminating their dim surroundings red. Everyone passing through looked cheery… in short, it was no

different from that day ten years ago.

That day, too, I - Himeno and I - had sat on the steps like this, looking at the people walking down below. We conceded we had no right to mingle among them.
We were waiting for “something” that would acknowledge our existence and understand us fully.

And then Himeno made her premonition. “Something really good” would happen, and one day we’d be “glad we lived,” in the summer ten years later.
Furthermore, she said that if we both hadn’t found someone to marry in ten years, being that we were both “on the shelf,” we should be together.

Well, I was in that summer now. And the girl who made that promise wasn’t on the shelf, but was second-hand goods - and my life was going to end with me being not only unsold, but unfit to sell.
But ultimately, we were both without owners. We were once again left alone.

I wonder where Himeno is now, and what she’s doing?
Once more I prayed at that shrine surrounded by the buzzing of cicadas.

I noticed quite a lot of time had passed. I heard Miyagi’s pencil against her notebook. The festival was drawing to a close, the

shadows of people growing sparse.
I raised my head, gathered up the trash, and gently stood up.

There was a figure coming up the steps.

It was too dark to see their face, but the instant I saw her outline, time stopped for me.
Some things are too good to be true. So people say.
And yet, though people may not notice it, things do come together, in this sort of perverse, prankstery way.

I felt the cells of my body trembling with joy.
With each step she took, everything from the day we first met at 4 years old, to the summer day she went away and moved schools, ran through my mind.
Though she looked different from ten years ago - well, no matter how much she changed, it wouldn't mean I wouldn't be able to recognize her.

By the time we were close enough to see each other's faces, I called to her in a hoarse voice.
"Himeno."

The girl stopped and looked at me with hollow eyes.
Her expression gradually became one taken completely aback.

"…Kusunoki?"
Himeno said my name in the same transparent-esque voice

that only she had.

Chapter 10 – To My One and Only Childhood Friend

I can scarcely remember anything Himeno and I said to each other after our reunion. In fact, I can't even remember how Himeno looked or acted. I was just so excited that I talked without thinking.
But it didn't matter what the conversation was. For me to say something and Himeno to respond, that was all I needed.

It didn't seem she had come to see the festival. She was here for work-related reasons, and her car happened to stall near the shrine, so she ended up passing through.
She dodged the question of what kind of work she did. All Himeno would tell me is that it was a "person-to-person" kind of job.

"I'd love to talk a little longer, but I have to get up early," she said, itching to leave, so I invited her to go out drinking or whatnot sometime soon.
Alcohol's no good, but sure, we can have a meal, Himeno agreed.
Promising to meet for dinner two days later, we parted.

I was so brimming with joy as to forget about Miyagi for a while.
"Well, that was nice," Miyagi said. "I didn't expect that to happen myself."
"Me neither. Really seems too good to be true."

“Yes. …I suppose sometimes it is true.”

I would be meeting Himeno again in two days. I needed to consider that the main event, so to speak.
I needed to make some preparations before that.

Back at the apartment, I crossed out the Himeno line on my Things to Do Before I Die, and once I was ready to go to bed, I told Miyagi.
“I’ve got kind of a strange request for you.”
“I don’t drink.”
“It’s not that. It’s about tomorrow. I want to be extra sure about meeting Himeno. Luckily, I’ve got two days, so I can use all tomorrow to prepare. And I want you to help prepare me.”

“Prepare you?”
“I know it’d be pointless to keep anything hidden from you, so I’m gonna be honest. In twenty years, I’ve never really interacted with a girl, ever. So if I just went into this Himeno thing, I know I’d probably bore her and mess up a lot. To hopefully cut down on that, I want to go to town tomorrow and rehearse.”

Miyagi’s face was stuck with a blank look for a few seconds.
“If I’m not mistaken… You want me to play the part of Ms. Himeno?”
“That’s right. Will you take it?”

"…Well, I don't much mind, but I imagine there would be numerous problems…"
"Oh, you mean how I'm the only one who can see you?"
"Yes, that," Miyagi confirmed.
"That's no problem. Why should I care what people think of me? I'm using up all my embarrassment on what Himeno thinks of me anyway. Even if everybody else ridicules me, as long as Himeno likes me just a little, I'm satisfied with that."

Miyagi looked stunned. "You change in a blink when it comes to Ms. Himeno, don't you. …But there's another problem. As you should be aware, I know very little about how women in my generation think. As such, I do not believe you can count on me to be a decent substitute. What may be pleasing to Ms. Himeno could be displeasing to me, what is boring to Ms. Himeno could be exciting to me, what is rude to Ms. Himeno could be polite to me - there could be many such discrepancies. Thus, looking at a sample of women around the age of 20…"

"You get humble in a blink when it comes to yourself, don't you," I interrupted. "It's no problem. Far as I can see, you're not that different from any other girls out there. Except for the part where you're a little cuter."
"…Well, if it's no problem to you, then very well," Miyagi nervously replied.

The next morning, I made a reservation at a salon and went

into town to buy clothes and shoes. I couldn't go meeting Himeno wearing my worn blue jeans and stained sneakers. Finding a select shop that seemed to suit my tastes and following Miyagi's suggestions, I bought a Fred Petty polo shirt, Chino pants, a belt to match, and then at a shoe store, chocolate-colored desert boots.

"I just don't think you have to wear anything too fancy. As long as it comes off as being clean, that should be enough."
"Can I interpret that as "good materials"?", I asked.
"You're free to interpret it however you want."
"Got it. I'll do that. Feels like I'm being criticized, though."
"You don't need to tell me every little thing."

Once we were done shopping, we went to the salon quite a bit earlier than my appointment.
As Miyagi advised, I just explained "I'm going to meet someone important tomorrow." The woman gave a complacent smile and passionately cut my hair, giving me a number of practical tips for my big day.

Donned in new clothes and with neatly-cut hair, I was without exaggeration like a different person. The gloomy hair and shabby shirt seemed to have more effect on my appearance than I thought.
Now that those were gone, I was like a fresh young guy out of a pop music video.

“Why, you seem almost like an entirely different person from yesterday prior,” Miyagi told me.
“Yeah, I don’t really look like a guy whose life is only worth 10,000 yen a year, huh?”
“Indeed. Almost as if you have the promise of a happy future.”
“Thanks. You look like a library fairy when you smile yourself.”
“…You’re rather chipper today, Mr. Kusunoki.”
“Seems so.”

“So what was that about a "library fairy”?“
"Just means a graceful and intelligent woman.”
“Please save that line for Ms. Himeno, will you?”
“But her virtues are a different beast. I’m talking about you, Miyagi.”
Her expression still intact, she lightly bowed her head. “Well, thanks. You and I are worth next to nothing as humans, at any rate. According to our reports.”
“Pretty strange,” I said.

We were in an Italian restaurant by the street, and naturally our conversation sounded like me talking to myself.
A middle-aged couple sitting nearby was sneaking glances at me and whispering with each other.

After our meal, we left the main street, went down some stairs on the side of a bridge, and walked along the river.
I was full of alcohol by then, so I held Miyagi’s hand all the

while and swung it way back and forth as we walked. Miyagi looked concerned, and I continued to pull her along.
Others just saw me doing a weird walk, and I didn't care. I could never be among honest people anyway.
So then I might as well resolve to make myself a weird guy. It'd be a lot easier.

Once Miyagi was getting used to holding my hand, she said with a clear face, "Now, drunk Kusunoki, try to think of me as Himeno and seduce me."
I stopped and looked Miyagi right in the eye. "You appearing before me was the best thing that's ever happened in my life. The worst was when you left my sight. …And depending on your reply now, I might have a new best or worst."

"That was a pretty smooth delivery of such a roundabout pickup line. I'm impressed."
"So how do you think Himeno would reply?"
"Ah, well, if it were Ms. Himeno," Miyagi thought with her hand to her mouth. "…Perhaps she would say "What's this nonsense of all a sudden?" and try to laugh it off."
"Huh. What if it were Miyagi?"
"…I don't catch your meaning."
"Joking. Don't worry about it," I chuckled to myself.

"Are you really that kind of person, Mr. Kusunoki? The kind to joke."
"Not sure myself. I don't put much trust in words like

"personality" or “disposition” or “character.” Those things all change depending on the situation. Looking at it in the long run, what changes people is what situations they get into. People put a lot of faith in consistency, but it’s something more superficial than most people think.“

"I wouldn’t have expected you of all people to say something like that.”
“Everyone likes to think they’re the exception when there’s a depressing statistic.”
Miyagi lightly sighed. “I suppose that is true,” she agreed.

When we got tired of walking, we hopped on a random bus. There were quite a few passengers, but I kept talking to Miyagi about my memories of Himeno regardless.
We changed buses and got off at a viewing platform, a famous date spot in the town. There were about ten couples holding each other and sneaking kisses, but I kept talking to Miyagi anyway.
Strangely, I didn’t feel too many eyes on me. Everyone was too busy with themselves.

“Himeno was there the first time I came here. The railing near the top of that spiral staircase is just the right height for a kid to want to get on top of. So Himeno tried to climb up, but I noticed a gap in the railing just as Himeno nearly fell all the way to the ground. If I hadn’t happened to be there to stop her, she just might have. She acts intellectual, but she can be a real

goof too. It's like, you just can't leave her alone. I got a scratch in all the hurry reaching for her, but for that one day, she got unusually nice -"

Miyagi was giving me a concerned look as I was getting more talkative, as if brushing off her uneasiness.
She knew more than I did at that point. She had yet to tell me something crucial.
The viewing platform would have been an appropriate place to explain it, but she didn't speak of it.

Maybe she thought she'd let me keep dreaming as long as I could.

The day came at last. It was a rainy afternoon, and the station was filled with people carrying umbrellas. Looking over the plaza from the second floor, umbrellas of all colors moved around as they pleased.
I waited in front of the bookstore until 5 PM, but ten minutes past 5, Himeno hadn't showed up.
No hurry, I told myself. Everything's congested because of the rain, and unlike me, she's probably busy.
Even so, I was checking my watch three times every minute.

Twenty minutes passed that felt like an hour or two. Was I waiting in the wrong place? Was Himeno? She said in front of the bookstore, and this was the only bookstore here, so I didn't

see how.
After twenty-seven minutes, just as I was about to leave and look for Himeno, I saw her waving and walking toward me. I'd been starting to think her promise yesterday had just been a polite excuse for her to leave, so I was relieved beyond belief.

Even if Himeno hadn't been someone I'd been waiting to see for a decade, I still would have said she radiated beauty that day.
Every curve that made her up seemed to be created with careful consideration. Nothing was too excessive; it was like every part of her knew its duty.

If I were someone who had no connection to her, I'd probably feel a pain in my chest with just one look. She'd leave a hole in my chest I was dying to fill.
"She'll never be mine, will she. …So then isn't my life pointless?", I might even think.
So it was a lucky thing that I was the closest one to her out of all these people at the station. I was deeply happy about that.

"Bus was late because of the rain," Himeno explained. "Sorry to make you wait. I'll treat you to something."
"No, allow me. I invited you this time, so forget about it for today."
I realized that not only my appearance, but my voice had changed. It sounded about half an octave higher, and it had a surprisingly good sound to it, as if that were its inherent

sound.

“Hmm. So you’re expecting a "next time”?“, she asked with an unconcerned yet scrutinizing look.
"Yeah. And next time, I’ll probably be expecting one after that.”

“Glad you’re being honest,” she giggled.
That’s definitely something Himeno would say, I whispered to myself. She hadn’t changed in ten years. She was still sarcastic, but still spoke with a hint of warmth.

We went through the tunnel, and when we reached the end and I opened my umbrella, Himeno swiftly snatched it from me and held it between us.
“You were always the one who forgot his umbrella, Kusunoki, so I reluctantly had to let you share mine.”
“That’s right,” I said, taking the umbrella back and holding it near Himeno. “So then wouldn’t it be good to reverse it from now on?”
“Aha.”

We walked together under one umbrella.
By the way, what were you doing there the other day?, Himeno asked.
Looking for you, Himeno, I replied.
Liar, Himeno said, shoving me in the shoulder.
It’s true, I said laughing.

I was thinking that things were going great.
I was telling Himeno my affection for her, and she was showing me her affection for me.
That's what I believed, and I didn't doubt it.
I didn't really want to know what Himeno was thinking then, deep in her chest.

Now, how about we compare answers.

While I sat across from Himeno in the restaurant and talked with her, I made an unbelievable mistake.
To be exact, maybe it wasn't really a mistake. If I were given countless chances to redo the scene, I would have made the same choice every time. There was no other choice.
On top of that, the reason why my choice was a "mistake" was not something that originated in that meeting, but something that had gradually taken form since much earlier.

Still. In time, I most definitely made a mistake.
But in any event, the results of that "mistake" came to save me.

And at the same time, I came to learn why Miyagi had tried to stop me from meeting Himeno.

After ordering, I smiled at Himeno, to show her my affection.
She responded with the same.
Himeno took a sip of ice water from her glass and said, "I'd like

to know what you've been up to all these years, Kusunoki."
"I'd like to hear about you first," I responded, but she insisted, "Let's start with Kusunoki."

I prefaced it with "Well, this isn't going to be all that interesting," then talked about my time in middle and high school. It really wasn't of any interest.
How I gradually started slacking on my studies in the second year of middle school. How my perfect memory at ten years old rapidly worsened with each year.
How I went to the best high school in the area, but stopped studying in the middle, so I now went to a shockingly average college.
How I had to persuade my parents - who thought that there was no point in going to a college if it wasn't famous - to pay to get me in, then had to pay for classes and expenditures myself.
And how I hadn't touched a paintbrush since the winter when I was 17.

I was done in less than five minutes. There was hardly anything worth talking about in my life.

"Huh, so you gave up art. …That's too bad. I liked your pictures, Kusunoki," Himeno said. Big difference from this guy I know, I thought.
"You were drawing all the time. And you made such beautiful, breathtaking pictures like it was nothing. I was always jealous how I could never live up to that, you know."

“You never told me anything like that then.”
“Because I was really antagonistic to you then. All my talents were in studying, so I didn’t want to admit your other talents. But… you probably never noticed, but sometimes I took your pictures home and stared at them, Kusunoki,” Himeno said, her eyes looking far away.

“Yeah, I was antagonistic too. We were about the same in academics, but the praise from adults always went to pretty Himeno. I thought it was unfair someone could be such a capable student *and* beautiful.”
“Nobody would’ve expected someone like her to drop out of high school,” Himeno casually let out.
“Drop out?”, I said with intentional surprise.
“So you didn’t know.” She lowered her eyebrows and smiled. “I thought rumor might have gotten around at a reunion or something.”
“Never showed up to any class reunions. Since I thought you wouldn’t either, Himeno.”
“Hmm. …Um, I wouldn’t say this is too interesting either, but…”

Himeno then explained everything up to her dropping out. However, she omitted the part about her pregnancy which Miyagi had given in her summary.
All Himeno said was “I married a graduating senior and dropped out, but conflicts came up, and we divorced.”

“I think I was childish,” Himeno told me with a strained smile. “I just couldn’t move on accepting things as they were. I guess I couldn’t stand the slightest imperfection and messed everything up from the start. Nothing’s changed in my head since that summer ten years ago, when I changed schools and separated from you. …I’m sure I was a smart girl back then. But that made me think that I didn’t need to mature any further. And so I’m still not much different from that ten-year-old dreamer, while everyone else keeps changing.”

Himeno stared at her hands on the table with the eyes of a wounded little girl.
“So what about you, Kusunoki? I’m sure you’ve changed in ten years, too?”

Around this point, I began to lose my calm.
“You’re not the only one who hasn’t changed, Himeno,” I said. “I’ve been the same since the day we separated, too. Years with nothing to live for, passing pointless, lonely days. It felt like the world existed just to disappoint me. Maybe I was already dead, more or less. That’s why just a few days ago -”

I knew what I was saying. I predicted how it would sound to Himeno’s ears. And I understood how foolish it was to do this. But that wouldn’t stop me.

“…I sold my lifespan. At a mere 10,000 yen for each year.”

Himeno face went pale and looked bewildered, but it was impossible to stop the flow of words. I let the mess that had built up inside me all out.
I went from one thing to another. The shop that bought lifespan. Thinking I'd get several million yen a year when it was ten thousand, the minimum price. Despairing over my future and selling off all but three months. And being followed by an invisible observer ever since.
I prattled on in a way that invited sympathy.

"You can't see her, Himeno, but my observer's here right now," I said, pointing at Miyagi. "Here, right here. She's a girl named Miyagi. She's speaks really bluntly, but if you just talk with her she's actually very…"
"Hey, Kusunoki? I don't mean any offense, but… Do you have any idea how completely unreal what you're talking about is?", Himeno apologetically asked.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I know how ridiculous it sounds."
"Yes, it's ridiculous. …But you know, Kusunoki, despite that, I can't think it's a lie. Not the part about not having much time left, nor that there's a girl beside you observing you. We've known each other long enough that if you tried to lie to me, I'd be able to tell right away. So while it's difficult, I can believe that you're not lying about selling your lifespan."

It would be difficult to explain to anyone just how happy I was at that moment.

“…I’m sorry for putting it off, but I’ve actually been hiding something too…”
Himeno coughed and put a handkerchief to her mouth, then stood up.
“Excuse me. We’ll continue this after dinner,” Himeno said, then walked away.

She was headed for the bathroom, so I let it slide.
Our food arrived, and I hoped Himeno would come back soon. I had to hear the rest of what she had to say.

But Himeno never came back.

Since she was taking so long, I was worried Himeno had fainted from anemia or something and made a request of Miyagi.
“Sorry, but could you check the ladies’ room? Maybe something happened to Himeno.”
Miyagi silently nodded.

Miyagi came back a few minutes later and informed me that Himeno was gone.
I walked around the restaurant, but she was nowhere to be found.

I returned to my seat in defeat and placed myself down in front of a cold meal. I’d lost all energy. I felt something heavy

and unpleasant in my gut.
My throat was dry and ached. I tried to grab my glass, but my focus was off and I spilled water on the table.

I ate my cold pasta slowly.
After a while, Miyagi sat across from me and started eating up Himeno's pasta.
"Quite tasty even if it's cold," she said.
I didn't say anything.

Once I finished the meal, still unsure how it had ever tasted, I asked Miyagi.
"Hey, Miyagi. Be honest with me. Why do you think Himeno left?"
Miyagi replied. "Perhaps because she thought you were insane."
Which in a sense was true.

But the truth was a little more complicated, and Miyagi knew that too.
And she hid that, for my sake.

After paying at the register and leaving, I heard someone calling me from behind. I turned to find a waiter running up with something for me.
"The woman you came with asked me to give you this."
It was a letter, which seemed to have been torn out of a notebook.

I took my time reading it.
And when I did, I found that Miyagi had been lying to me all this time.
“You knew about this and kept it from me?”
Miyagi answered with her head hung.
“I did. I’m sorry.”
“No need to apologize. You let me had my good dream.”
I was the one who needed to apologize. But I didn’t have the energy left to acknowledge my own faults.

“And in my original life, Himeno succeeded in her objective. Is that right?”
“Correct,” Miyagi said. “Ms. Himeno… did it right in front of your eyes, Mr. Kusunoki.”

To show it to me.
To clear up years and years of resentment.

I read through the letter again.
This is what it said.

To my one and only childhood friend.

I had intended to die right in front of you.
At the viewing platform, I had meant to have you wait below and fall right next to you.

Maybe you never quite realized, but I always despised you.

Never responding to my cries for help, then casually appearing before me now, I couldn't hate you more.

So now that I'm useless to you, I thought I'd kill myself. But it seems like you've gone even more insane than me in these ten years.
It doesn't seem like it'll do any good getting revenge on you now.
So I'm going to just quietly vanish.
Goodbye.
I only hope that what you said about having little time to live is true.

What a fool I am.
I'd lived alone all my life to avoid feeling like this.
I should have just trusted in myself to the end.

I went to the bridge by the station, carefully folded Himeno's letter into a paper plane, and threw it toward the river which reflected the light from the buildings. It hovered in the air for some time, but it eventually touched the water and sank.
Then I took out the money-filled envelope I was going to give Himeno, and distributed it bill by bill to passersby.

People's reactions varied. For those who looked at me dubiously, there were also those who thanked me with an obsequious smile and took off.

For those who definitively turned it down and pushed it back at me, there were those who asked for more.

“You should stop this,” said indifferent Miyagi, tugging my sleeve.
“I’m not bothering anyone, am I?”, I replied, brushing her hand away.

The money was gone in no time. I even took money out of my own wallet. I gave away everything down to the 1000-yen bills.
Once I had nothing left to give out, I stood right in the middle of the street.
People walking by looked at me uncomfortably.

I didn’t have money to pay a taxi, so I had to walk home.
Miyagi took a blue umbrella out from her bag and opened it.
I realized I’d forgotten my umbrella at the restaurant, but I didn’t care if I got wet or caught a cold anymore.

“You’ll be drenched,” Miyagi said, holding the umbrella high.
She was telling me to join her.
“As you can see, I’m in a getting-drenched mood,“ I told her.
“Is that right,” she said, closing the umbrella and stowing it in her bag.
Miyagi walked behind me, both of us soaking wet.
“You don’t have to get drenched, you know.“
“As you can see, I am in a getting-drenched mood,” Miyagi

smiled.
Do as you will, I thought, turning my back to her.

I found a bus stop where I could keep out of the rain and took shelter there. There was a bent streetlight right above, that occasionally flickered on as if remembering to turn itself on. The moment I sat down, I felt incredibly sleepy. My mind wanted rest more than my body did.

I think I only slept for a few minutes. The chill of my drenched body quickly woke me up again.
Miyagi was sleeping beside me. She was holding her knees, desperately trying to warm herself.
I pitied her for having to bear witness to the selfish actions of an idiot like me.

I stood up slowly so I didn't wake Miyagi and wandered around the area, finding an abandoned community center.
I wouldn't say it was very clean, but it still had power, and the front door and rooms weren't locked.
I went back to the bench, lifted up sleeping Miyagi, and moved her inside.
Certainly it would have to wake up a girl whose sleeping was lighter than mine. But Miyagi feigned sleep all the while.

The room smelled of tatami mats. There was a pile of cushions in the corner. After checking for bugs, I put a few of them on the floor and laid Miyagi down. I did the same thing nearby for

my own bedding.
There was a mosquito coil near the window that must have been there for decades, so I lit it with my lighter.

The raindrops served as a lullaby.

I began doing what I usually did before I fell asleep.
I imagined the best landscapes I could on the backs of my eyelids.
I thought about every little detail of the world I wanted to live in.
I freely pictured “memories” that I’d never had, a “somewhere” I’d never been, a “someday” that could have been past or future.

That had been my practice every night since I was five years old.
Maybe that childish practice was the reason I could never get accustomed to the world.
But I was sure that was the only way I could compromise with it.

Perhaps what I thought was me waking up in the middle of the night was really a dream founded in hope, common in times of despondency.
If it were a dream, then it was a rather embarrassing dream.
If it were reality - to be frank, there could be nothing that

would make me happier.

I heard someone walking on the mats. I knew it was Miyagi squatting down beside my pillow because of her smell. Even in summer, Miyagi smelled like a clear winter morning.
I kept my eyes shut. I'm not sure why, but it felt best to do so. She touched my head and gently pet it. She probably didn't do it for more than a minute.
Miyagi seemed to whisper something, but I couldn't make it out over the rain.

In my drowsiness, I thought: Just how much has Miyagi helped me? How cornered would I feel now if Miyagi weren't there? But that's why I shouldn't make her worry any moreso - so I told myself.
She's strictly here for her job. She's kind to me because I'm going to die soon.
It doesn't mean she has any affection for me.

I shouldn't have any more baseless hopes. Those don't just make me unhappy, but her too. I'm burdening her with extra guilt, giving my death a bad aftertaste.
I'll just die quietly. I'll go back to my usual, self-sufficient, modest life where I don't count on anyone. Like a cat, I'll expire silently and in secret.
So I secretly vowed.

The next morning, I was woken up by oppressive heat. I heard

grade-school kids doing radio aerobics outside.
Miyagi was already up, whistling Nina Simone's "I Wish I Knew" and tidying up the cushions.
I still felt some drowsiness, but we couldn't stay here long.

Let's go home, Miyagi said.
Yeah, I replied.

Chapter 11 – Pushing for a Vending Machine Tour

After walking for four hours from the community center, we finally reached the apartment. The smell of my own room was nostalgic.
My body was drenched in sweat and my feet were blistered. As I opened the door to use the shower, I suddenly wondered if I should let Miyagi use it first. But if I showed too much concern, I might be the one to destroy that sense of distance she'd created between us.

Resisting the urge to keep the water running, I quickly washed myself, changed, and went back to the living room.
From what I'd seen so far, Miyagi could freely shower and eat while I slept. So I lied down and went right to sleep.
While I pretended to sleep, I heard Miyagi quietly head for the shower. When I was about to get back up, I heard her footsteps coming back, so I hastily closed my eyes.

"Mr. Kusunoki," Miyagi said.
I pretended not to notice her.
"Mr. Kusunoki, are you sleeping?", Miyagi whispered by my

pillow. “I ask, of course, because you appear to be feigning sleep. And if you are indeed, then I thought it would be nice if it were out of concern for me. …Good night. I’ll be borrowing your shower.”

When I heard the door to the shower shut, I got up and looked toward the corner of the room where Miyagi typically was. She’d be sleeping there again tonight, wouldn’t she. In a position that didn’t seem like you could get any sleep in, taking a few minutes to watch and a few minutes to nap.

Just as an experiment, I sat there, imitating the way Miyagi sat, and tried to sleep. But sleep just wouldn’t come.
Miyagi returned and tapped me on the shoulder. “What are you doing there? You should sleep in bed,” she admonished.
“That’s my line. *You* should sleep in bed. It’s ridiculous sleeping like this.”
“Ridiculous as it may be, I am used to it.”

I lied down on the left side of my bed. “I’m sleeping on the left side from now on. No matter what, I won’t intrude on the right side, won’t even look. It’d be a perfect place for you to observe me up close. It’s up to you if you want to use it or not, but I’ll sleep on the left at any rate.”

I was trying to find a meeting point. I doubted if Miyagi would accept something like me sleeping on the floor and her in a bed. Though even if I told her it was fine to sleep beside me, it

didn't mean she'd easily accept it.
"Are you still half-asleep, Mr. Kusunoki?", Miyagi asked as if confirming my intentions.
I ignored her and closed my eyes. After about twenty minutes, I felt Miyagi getting on the other side.

We shared the one bed with our backs to each other. I acknowledged that the suggestion was for my own self-satisfaction. Thus, I was troubling Miyagi again.
Really, she shouldn't have wanted to do this. Responding to my kindness could damage her tenacity as an observer, built up over years.
Furthermore, the kindness of someone nearing death was a fickle, unstable thing. That sort of kindness doesn't help people, it hurts them.

Even so, Miyagi accepted my lackluster show of tenderness with greater tenderness still.
I supposed she was showing me respect. Or maybe she was just deathly tired.

I woke up with a red sunset filling the room. I thought Miyagi would have long been awake, but she seemed like she'd be sleeping a little longer. I got out of bed and squinted at the bright sunlight.
The moment we made eye contact, we both looked away. After such a deep sleep, her hair and clothes were messy, and she seemed almost defenseless.

“I was just a little tired today,” Miyagi gave as an excuse. “I’ll sleep in my usual spot from tomorrow on.”
Then she added, “But thank you very much.”

I walked with Miyagi in the sunset. The cicadas were buzzing. Maybe because of the bed incident, Miyagi seemed a little more distant today.
At the convenience store, I withdrew the small amount of money I had left and collected my part-time money for the month.

These would be my last war funds.
I’d have to use it carefully.

After watching the sunset from a pedestrian bridge, I had the special at a beef bowl shop. It used a meal ticket system, so Miyagi bought her own ticket and handed it to me.
“Running out of things to do,” I said as I finished my miso soup. “I’ve done everything on my Things to Do Before I Die list. So now what?”
“Do what you like. Even you must have hobbies of some sort, yes?”
“Yeah, they were listening to music and reading. …But now that I think about it, those two were just means to keep living. I used music and books as a way to make a compromise with life. Now that there’s no need to force myself to keep going, they’re not so necessary as before.”

“Perhaps you should change the way you appreciate them, then. From now on, you can purely enjoy their beauty.”
“Yeah, but there’s a problem. No matter how I look at books and listen to music, I feel distant, like it’s got nothing to do with me. …Think about it. Most things in the world are made for people who are going to keep living. Which is only natural, of course. You don’t create for people who are going to die soon.”
A nearby man around 50 who was working through his beef bowl furrowed his brow at me for talking to myself about death.

“Do you not appreciate anything more on the simple side? … For example, do you like looking at abandoned places, or walking along tracks and counting railroad ties, or playing arcade cabinets abandoned decades ago?”
“Those are awfully specific. Let me guess, you observed guys like that?”
“Yes. There was even one who spent their last month lying in the back of a pickup truck and looking up at the sky. They gave all the money from selling their lifespan to an old man they didn’t know, and asked him to drive a pickup truck around places where people wouldn’t stop him.”

“Sounds peaceful. That sounds like it might be the smartest way to go, surprisingly enough.”
“It is rather interesting. It would be a fresh feeling watching

the scenery fly by."
I tried to imagine it. Under a blue sky, down winding rural roads, feeling a comfortable breeze - going anywhere. All the memories and regrets would rise from my head and be left behind on the road. A sense of the further you go, the further away you are - much like a dying person.

"Could I hear more like that? As long as it's nothing you can't tell me for business reasons or secrecy," I requested.
"I can tell you plenty when we return to the apartment," Miyagi said. "But you will appear rather suspicious if you keep talking here."

We took a big detour on the way back, passing through a small sunflower field, a former elementary school building, and a graveyard built on slanted land.
There was some kind of event at the middle school, and we passed by healthy, tanned kids smelling of deodorant and bug spray. It was a vivacious night that felt like pure, condensed summer.

When we got back to the apartment, I got on the Cub with Miyagi and we set out again.
Maybe because we were both dressed lightly, I clearly felt the smoothness of her body and was made restless.
After accidentally ignoring a red light, I quickly grabbed the brake, sticking us even closer to each other, and I hoped she didn't notice my quickened pulse.

We went up the hills and parked on one that seemed to have the best view of town. I bought us two canned coffees from a vending machine, and enjoyed the meager view.
Below us was a residential district which released a simple orange glow, seeming so small in comparison to the light of the city some distance away.

Once we were back, I brushed my teeth, lied down on the bed, and listened to Miyagi talk. She told me the less hurtful anecdotes about her past subjects with the same rhythm one would read a child a storybook.
There was nothing particularly unique about these stories, so to speak, but they soothed me more than most works of literature.

The next day, as I folded more paper cranes with the remaining origami paper, I thought about what I should do. Miyagi sat at the table folding cranes, too.
Wouldn't be bad to die drowning in paper cranes, I said, scooping some up in my hands and tossing them up. Miyagi similarly collected a lot of them in her hands and dropped them over my head.

When I got tired of origami, I went out to get some fresh air. I bought short Hopes from the cigarette shop, lit one on the spot, and after drinking a canned coffee from a vending machine, I realized something.

I didn't even see it right under my nose.

I guess a little mutter must have slipped out, because Miyagi looked at my face and asked "What is it?"
"No, well, it's really stupid… I just remembered something I can really, truly say I like."
"Please, tell me."
"I love vending machines," I said, scratching my head.

"Ah," Miyagi said, seeming to miss a beat. "…What about them do you like?"
"Hmm. I don't know if I can say for sure myself. But as a kid, I really wanted to be a vending machine when I grew up."
Miyagi slowly tilted her head and looked at my blankly.

"Um. Just checking, but by vending machine, you mean the machines which sell coffee, soda, and the like? Like the one you just used?"
"Yeah. But more than that. Cigarettes, umbrellas, charms, yaki onigiri, udon, ice, ice cream, hamburgers, oden, french fries, corned beef sandwiches, cup noodles, beer, liquor… Vending machines offer all manner of things. Japan is the land of vending machines. Because they're good for keeping order."

"And you thus have a love for vending machines, then."
"Yeah, I do. I like to use them, I even like to just look at them. Even a plain old vending machine might catch my eye and get me looking closer at it."

“Hmm, well… It’s a hobby with some individuality to it.” Miyagi tried to follow up, but it was a really stupid hobby. It wasn’t productive in the least. The symbol of a stupid, worthless life, I thought.

“But I think I do understand,” Miyagi said to cheer me up.
“My burning desire to become a vending machine?”, I smiled.
“No, that I don’t think I can ever understand. But, you see… vending machines are always there. So long as you provide money, they will always offer warmth. They offer more than the sum of their products. They offer a clear function, with invariance and permanence.”
I was somewhat moved by her mini-speech. "Wow. You said what I wanted to say a lot better than I could.”
“Thank you.” She bowed her head, not looking particularly pleased. “Vending machines are important to us observers as well. Unlike clerks, they don’t ignore us. …So it’s all well and good that you say you like vending machines. But what do you actually want to do, then?”

“Well, let me talk about something else I like. Every time I come to this cigarette shop, I’m reminded of Paul Auster’s "Smoke.” I really liked the thing about going in front of the cigar shop every morning without fail and repeatedly taking a photo of the same place. Getting invested in a simple thing like that felt really thrilling. …So. I want to imitate Auggie Wren, and take photos that are meaningless at a glance. Just keep taking crude photos of ordinary vending machines, in a way

that anybody could do.“

"I’m not sure how to put it,” Miyagi said, “but I think I like that too.”
And so my vending machine tour began.

I bought a silver halide camera, a strap, and ten rolls of film from the thrift shop. Those were the only preparations I needed to make.
I knew a digital camera would be cheaper and easier to manage photos with, but I opted otherwise to get more of a sense of “taking photos.”
I filled up the camera with film, got on the Cub, and went around taking pictures of vending machines that caught my eye in every nook and cranny.

Every time I took a picture, I tried to get as much of the stuff that surrounded the vending machine in the finder as I could. I wasn’t concerned about small differences like what drinks were offered and the layout of the buttons. I just wanted to capture what kind of place the vending machine was in, and in what condition.

I found far, far more vending machines around town than I’d expected once I started looking. I took a few dozen pictures just in the area around the apartment.
There were many vending machines I’d always overlooked

despite how many times I'd passed them, and slight discoveries like that made my heart dance.
Sometimes the same vending machine would show a very different face at day and at night. While some vending machines glowed to stand out and had bugs flocking to them, others saved electricity by only lighting their buttons, so they floated in darkness.

I knew that even when it came to a hobby as dumb as this, there were people far more serious about it than me, and I could never compete with them.
But I wholeheartedly did not care. This was, as someone once said it, the method most suited to me.

At the start of each day, I'd head for the photo studio and get breakfast in the thirty minutes waiting for the film to develop. At the end of each day, I'd lay the photos I developed that morning on the table, look at them with Miyagi, and carefully put each one into an album.
Though the common point between all the photos was the focus on a vending machine, that made the differences of everything else stand out.
Kind of like the same person taking photos with them in the middle, always with the same pose and expression. Vending machines served like a measurement tool.

The owner of the photo studio seemed interested in me and how I came every morning just to develop photos of vending

machines.
He was about forty, had many gray hairs, was unhealthily thin, and very modest. One day he noticed me casually talking to empty space and asked.
“So there’s someone there, is there?”

Miyagi and I looked at each other.
“That’s right. A girl named Miyagi. Her job’s to observe me,” I said. Though she knew it was pointless, Miyagi also bowed her head to him.
I didn’t expect him to believe me, but he nodded “I see,” quickly accepting Miyagi’s existence. Apparently there was the occasional strange person.

“So these strange photos, then - you’re actually taking photos of her?”, he asked.
“No, that’s not it. They’re just photos of vending machines. I’m going around with Miyagi’s help and doing a vending machine tour.”
“And will that do something good for her?”
“No, this is simply my hobby. Miyagi just comes along with me. For her job.”
The owner’s face told how little he understood. “Well, keep at it,” he said.

We left the shop, and I took a picture of Miyagi standing next to the tandem seat on the Cub.
“What are you doing?”, Miyagi said with head tilted.

“Just figured I’d take one, after what the owner said.”
“It will only appear as a meaningless photo of a bike to others.”
“*All* my pictures are meaningless to others,” I said.

Of course, people like the photo studio owner - and I’d be concerned if they weren’t - were the minority.
One morning when we were leaving the apartment to visit a dump, and I held the door waiting for Miyagi to put on her shoes, my neighbor came downstairs. He was a tall man with coercive eyes.
When Miyagi stepped out and said “Sorry to make you wait,” and I closed the door behind her with an “Alright, let’s go,” he gave me a disturbed look.

It was an utterly clear, not very windy day. I was lost in an area I’d never seen nor heard of, wandering for two hours, and when I finally found places I knew, I was again in my - and Himeno’s - hometown.
Maybe that was the fundamental direction I went in when I was lost. Maybe it was a sort of homecoming instinct.

Of course, it didn’t change the fact that it was a place with vending machines. I ran the Cub down the roads taking pictures.
I found a retro ice cream vending machine at the candy store I’d often gone to as a boy. My particular favorites were the chocolate barley puffs, kinako sticks, dice caramel, orange

gum, Botan Rice Candy - come to think of it, I ate nothing but sweets.
The candy store had closed shop a long time ago, but the red-rusted, busted vending machine that was there the first time I visited was the same as ever.
The phone booth on the other side of the street, which looked like a public bathroom on the outside, had been there about as long, but the machine still seemed just barely functional.

Miyagi and I sat on a bench in the weed-ridden park, illuminated by sunlight coming through the trees, and ate onigiri we'd made in the morning.
There was no sign of any people around, but there was a black cat and a brown-speckled one. The cats looked from afar, and as if sensing no danger, gradually came closer.
I wished I had some food to give them, but unfortunately I didn't carry around things which cats would like with me.

"Come to think of it, Miyagi, can cats see you?"
Miyagi stood up and walked over to the cats. The black cat ran away, and the brown-speckled cat kept its distance, then followed a few seconds later.
"Indeed, dogs and cats can see me," Miyagi said, turning around. "That said, it's not as if they like me."

We took a short rest after eating, and Miyagi started drawing in her notebook with a pencil.
I followed her gaze to find the cats. They'd moved up to the top

of a slide, and Miyagi seemed to like the scene.
I was surprised she had that kind of hobby. Maybe all this time she looked like she was writing an observation log, she was immersing herself in her own pastime.

“So you do this for a hobby,” I remarked.
“Yes. Are you surprised?”
“Yeah. You’re not so great, though.”
“Which is why I’m practicing. And isn’t that great,” Miyagi said, proudly for some reason.

“Could you show me what you’ve drawn?”
She suddenly closed her notebook and put it in her bag.
“We should be moving on now,” she said, hurrying me along.

It was after spending half the day searching my hometown, as we headed for the next town, when I passed in front of the candy store again.
There was someone sitting on the Snow Brand bench in front of the store. And it was someone I knew well.

I parked the Cub on the roadside, stopped the engine, and approached the old woman on the bench.
“Hello.”
Her response came slowly. But my voice seemed to get through to her, and she turned her eyes to me.
She must have been over 90. Her face and her hands folded on

her lap had what I felt were thousands of wrinkles. Her sheer white hair hung down lifelessly, and her dejected look was at once tragic.

I squatted down in front of the bench and again greeted her.
“Hello. You probably don’t remember me, do you?”
It seemed I could take her silence as a confirmation.
“It’s understandable. It was about ten years ago I last came here.”
As expected, she didn’t reply. The old woman’s gaze remained fixed several meters ahead of her. I carried the conversation myself.

“But I remember you very well. It’s not necessarily true that you’ll have a good memory just because you’re young. I’m still only 20, but I’ve forgotten a lot about the past. However happy or sad something is, you’ll soon forget it if you don’t get a chance to recall it. What people don’t realize is that they’ve forgotten about forgetting. If everyone really preserved the happiest memory from their past perfectly, they’d only be sadder living in their relatively hollow present. And if everyone preserved the worst memory from their past perfectly, well, they’d still be sad. Everyone just remembers what it’s inconvenient not to remember.”

There was no argument nor agreement. The old woman was as still as a scarecrow.
“And though memory is so unstable like that, you still haven’t

faded in my mind because of how much you helped me back then. It was a very uncommon thing. Of course, ten years ago, I was rarely grateful to people. Even when adults were nice to me, I was convinced they were just in a position where they had to be, so it wasn't a pure act of good will. …Yes, I was a charmless child. A kid like that would even consider running away from home. When I was 8, or when I was 9, I forget exactly when, I got in a fight with my mother and left home. I've completely forgotten what we fought about. It must have been something stupidly trivial."

I sat beside the old woman, leaned on the back of the bench, and gazed up at distant pylons and the clouds in the blue sky. "I hadn't thought ahead much, so I went to kill time at the candy store. It clearly wasn't the time of day that a kid my age would be out walking alone, so you asked me. "Don't you need to go home?" Having just had a heated argument with a parent, I blubbered something back. When you heard that, you opened a door behind the register, led me over, and took out some teas and candies from inside. A few hours later, a call came from my parents, and when they asked if I was over there, you replied "He is, but let's say he isn't for another hour" and hung up. …Maybe it didn't mean anything at all to you. But I think thanks to that experience, I can still put my deepest hopes in someone else - or at least, so I've convinced myself."

Will you put up with my chatter for a little longer?, I asked. The old woman closed her eyes, seeming to get increasingly

stiff.

"If you've forgotten about me, then I'm sure you've forgotten about Himeno too. I always came along to the shop with her. …Like her name implies, she was like a princess out of a fairy tale. I don't mean any offense, but her unique beauty was something that seemed entirely unfitting for this town. Both Himeno and I were black sheep at school. I was probably just hated because I was a snot-nosed kid. But I think Himeno was hated because she was just so different. …I know it's rude of me, but I can't help but feel gratitude for that. Because by being driven away from the group, Himeno and I ended up together. Just having Himeno by my side, I could handle all the bullying from everyone else. I could think that, at any rate, they treated Himeno and I the same way."

Every time I said "Himeno," the old woman seemed to show just the slightest reaction. Pleased by this, I continued.

"In the summer of fourth grade, Himeno had to change schools because of her parents changing jobs. That served as a trigger for my image of her being increasingly deified. I used her remark about "being together if we hadn't found anyone by 20" as a prop for ten whole years. But just the other day, I learned that Himeno's fondness for me, once a certain point had passed, turned into a vicious hate. She'd even planned to commit suicide before my eyes. …Then later, I suddenly remembered. Just before I reunited with Himeno, I went by

myself to dig up a time capsule that our class had filled with letters and buried back in elementary school. I knew that I really shouldn't have, but I was going to die very soon due to some circumstances, so I thought I should be allowed at least that."

Now.
How about we compare answers.

"Now the strange thing was, Himeno's letter wasn't in the time capsule. I reasoned it was because Himeno happened to be absent that day, but once I thought about it, I realized that couldn't be. Those letters were something our teacher took plenty of time to have us prepare. She wasn't the kind of person to bury a time capsule without someone's letter just because they happened to be absent. It's conceivable that someone dug up the time capsule before me and took Himeno's letter. And if that was what happened - I can't think of anyone else who would do so than Himeno herself."

I had not actually realized this in advance.
But right then, everything started to come together in my mind.

"When I was 17, I received a single letter from Himeno. There was nothing particularly important about what was written in the letter itself. It was just enough that I was the recipient, and Himeno was the sender. She was never the sort of person to

write letters to others or call them, no matter how friendly she was with them. So the moment a letter from her arrived… I should have realized."

Yes.
I should have realized much, much sooner.

"*That letter was Himeno's form of an SOS.* She must have been asking for my help with that letter. Much like me, when she was cornered, she clung to her past, dug up the time capsule, remembered her one and only childhood friend, and sent me a letter. Not noticing her intent, I was no longer qualified for that position - and so I lost Himeno. She became hollow, and the moment I realized it, so did I. Himeno's going to commit suicide soon, and I'm going to run out of life soon. …A bad place to stop, but that's the end of this gloomy story. I'm terribly sorry for making you sit through all that."

As I stood up to leave, the old woman said "Goodbye," in a voice fading as soon as it left her lips.
That parting word was the only thing she said to me.
"Thank you very much. Goodbye," I replied, leaving the candy store behind.

Being forgotten by a past benefactor didn't hurt me that much. I was beginning to get used to being betrayed by my memories.

But at the time, I completely overlooked a certain possibility.

The girl who was always beside me, providing support as I experienced every form of disappointment.
The girl who felt despair like mine, but still chose to sell her time over her lifespan, leaving her with no future.
The girl who made up for what she lacked in courtesy with incredibly sweet concern.
I overlooked the possibility that she, Miyagi, could betray me.

"Mr. Kusunoki? Mr. Kusunoki."
Miyagi, who had stopping hesitating about embracing me if only while we rode in tandem, poked me in the flank while I drove.

I slowed down and asked "What?", and she said, as if in an attempt to impress me, "I'll tell you something good."
"I just remembered. I've been on this road a long time ago. Long before I became an observer. …If you follow the road a bit more, then make a right turn somewhere and go straight, you'll arrive at Starry Lake."
"Starry Lake?"
"The lake I told you I would want to visit again before I died. I don't know what it's officially called."
"Oh yeah, you did tell me about that."
"Now wasn't that something good?"
"Yeah it was," I agreed, also trying to lighten the mood. "We should go for sure."

“Do you think you have enough gas?”
“I’ll fill it up somewhere.”

After filling the tank as full as it could go at the nearest gas station, I drove on following Miyagi’s directions.
It was already past midnight. We went up a mountain trail, resting the engine where necessary, and arrived at what she called Starry Lake after about half an hour.

After buying cup ramen from the nearby convenience store and eating it on the bench outside, I stopped the Cub in the parking area ahead and walked down a mostly unlit road. While Miyagi looked around at all the buildings fondly, she repeatedly warned me “You cannot look up yet.” At the edge of my vision, I could indeed see part of an amazing starry sky, but I walked with my head down as Miyagi told me.

“Now, listen carefully to what I say,” Miyagi said. “I will guide you, so I want you to keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them.”
“You don’t want to show me until the very end, huh?”
“Yes. After all the effort, do you not want to see the stars in the best of conditions as well, Mr. Kusunoki? …Now close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes and Miyagi took my hand, slowly guiding me with “this way"s. Walking with my eyes closed allowed me to hear sounds I hadn’t before.

I'd thought the noises of the summer bugs were all one sound, but I was able to make out four different types. Lowly-buzzing bugs, shrilly high-pitched bugs, bugs with bird-like voices standing out at once, and ear-hurting frog-sounding bugs.
I heard the sounds of slight breezes and distant waves, and could even tell my footsteps apart from hers.

"Tell me, Mr. Kusunoki. What would you do if I were to deceive you, and lead you somewhere outrageous?"
"Outrageous how?"
"Hmm… Like a cliff, or a bridge. Somewhere where you would be in danger of falling."
"I didn't consider it, and I'm not gonna."
"Why not?"
"Can't see any reason why you'd do something like that."
"Is that right," Miyagi said, sounding bored.

I felt my feet no longer on asphalt, but on sand, and then soon it became wood. I guessed we'd arrived at a pier.
"Stop, keeping your eyes closed," Miyagi said as she let go of my hand. "Watch your step, but lie down flat. And then you may open your eyes."
I lowered myself, carefully laid my back on the ground, took a big breath, and opened my eyes.

That which filled my vision was not the "starry sky" I knew. Maybe I should put it this way - that day, I learned what the stars looked like for the first time.

I had “seen” the stars via books and television. I knew *of* a sky which contained the Summer Triangle, through which the Milky Way ran, which looked like a sputtering of ink.
But with those points of reference, even knowing the color and shape, I couldn’t really imagine the size of the thing.
The sight before my eyes was something much, much bigger than what I’d imagined. It was like a falling snow whose flakes radiated a powerful light.

I said to Miyagi beside me, “I feel like I understand why you’d want to see this again before you died.”
“Don’t you?”, she said smugly.

We laid on the pier looking up at the stars for a long time.
We saw three shooting stars. I wondered what I’d wish for when I saw the next one.

I didn’t have any thoughts of getting my lifespan back at this point. I didn’t want to meet Himeno, and I didn’t want to turn back time. I didn’t have the energy in me to start things over. I just wanted to die here peacefully, like falling asleep - that was my wish. Asking for any more than that would be not knowing my place.

I didn’t even need to think about what Miyagi would wish for. Her wish was to quit her observer job - so she would be an invisible woman no longer.

Her existence ignored by everyone, with only her subjects to acknowledge her… I could see her dying within a year. As much endurance as Miyagi had, it in no way meant she could survive thirty years of that life.

“Miyagi,” I voiced. “You’ve lied for my sake, haven’t you? Lies like how Himeno barely remembered me.”
Miyagi turned to me, still lying down, and instead of answering said, “I had a childhood friend as well.”
I spoke while trying to remember. “That being, the "person who was important to you” you mentioned once?“
"Yes. Well-remembered.”
I waited in silence, and Miyagi slowly began.

“I once had someone in my life who was to me as Ms. Himeno was to you. We could never feel accustomed to living in this world, so we relied on each other, and lived in our own world of mutual dependency. …After becoming an observer, the first thing I did on my first day off was to go check on him. I thought that he would have been terribly sad about my disappearance. He would have retreated into his shell, waiting for me to return - I did not question it wouldn’t be so. … However, in a few weeks without me, he had quickly adapted to a world without me. No, not that; a mere month after I vanished, he had assimilated into this world in the same way as those who’d rejected us as "different.”“

Miyagi looked at the sky again, and a warm smile came to her

lips.
"That was when I realized. To him, I was merely a shackle. …To speak truly, I wanted to make him unhappy. I wanted him to be sorrowful, and despair, and retreat into his shell, and wait for my never-to-come return, but to still somehow barely breathe. I didn't want to know that he could make it on his own. …I have not gone to see him since. Whether he is happy or sad, it would only depress me."

"But before you died, you'd still wanna meet him after all?"
"Yes. Because I don't know anything else. In the end of it all, that's the only thing I can cling to."
Miyagi raised herself and sat with her knees up. "So I can very much understand how you feel. Though perhaps you don't want me to."
"Nah," I said. "Thanks for understanding."
"Don't mention it," Miyagi said with a reserved smile.

We took photos of the nearby vending machines, then went back to the apartment.
Miyagi dove into my bed, claiming "only because today was so tiring." When I tried to sneak a look at Miyagi, she appeared to be doing the same, so we both hastily looked away, and slept facing opposite to each other.

I should have wished on a shooting star that things could go on like this.

When I next woke, Miyagi was gone. Only her notebook remained by the bed.

Chapter 12 – A Liar and a Little Prayer

When Miyagi first came to the apartment as my observer, I couldn't help being unnerved by her gaze.
My thought was: "If my observer were the opposite of her - ugly, dirty and middle-aged - I'm sure I'd be able to relax more and think about what the right thing to do was."

The observer who now stood before me instead of Miyagi was a man rather like that.
He was short, he had unsightly bald spots, his face was red like a drunk's though lush with whiskers, and his skin was oily. He blinked unusually often, he snorted as he breathed, and he spoke like he had phlegm caught in his throat.

"Where's the usual girl?" was my first question.
"On break," the man bluntly said. "I'm filling in today an' tomorrow."
I put my hand to my chest in relief. I was grateful observers didn't take shifts. Miyagi would be back in just two days.

"So even observers get days off," I said.
"'Course, gotta. Unlike you, we still gotta lotta livin' to do," he replied sarcastically.
"Huh. Well, that's a relief. And her break'll be over in two days,

and it'll be back to normal?"
"Yep, that's the plan," the man said.

I rubbed my sleepy eyes and looked at the man in the corner again, and saw him holding my album. The album of all my vending machine pictures.
"What the hell's this?", he asked.
"Don't you know about vending machines?", I joked.
"Tch. I was tryin' to ask what you'd take pictures like this for."
"Same as people who like the sky taking pictures of the sky. Flower-likers taking pictures of flowers, train-likers taking pictures of trains. You do it because you wanna. And I like vending machines."

The man flipped through a few pages in boredom, then declared "Trash," and tossed the album at me. Then he looked at all the paper cranes strewn around and gave an exaggerated sigh.
"So this is how you're spendin' your life, huh. Stupid as hell. Ain't you got anything better to do?"

His attitude didn't make me that unpleasant. In terms of honestly saying what I thought, he was easier to deal with. It was much preferable to being stared at from the corner like I was an object.
"I might, but if I did anything more enjoyable than this, my body might not be able to take it," I laughed.

He continued to find fault in everything in that same way.
This observer's a lot more aggressive, I thought.
I learned why after lunch, when I lied in front of the fan listening to music.

"Hey, you," the man said. I pretended not to hear him, and he cleared his throat. "You ain't causin' that girl any trouble, are ya?"
There was only one person I could think of to whom "that girl" could refer, but I didn't expect the man to refer to Miyagi that way, so my reply was delayed.
"By that girl, you mean Miyagi?"
"Who else?" The man furrowed his brow as if displeased by me speaking her name.
Seeing that, I felt some fondness for the man. So you're my ally, huh.

"Let me guess, you're friendly with Miyagi?", I asked.
"…Nah. Nothin' like that. I mean, we've never really seen each other." The man's tone suddenly got more docile. "Only talked a couple of times through documents, that's all. But I was the one who bought her time, so I saw her for about ten minutes, long time ago."
"What'd you think?"
"Poor girl," he said plainly. "Really, really pity her."
He seemed to mean it.

"My lifespan was worth the same as hers. Pitiful, huh?"

“Shaddup, you’re gonna die soon anyway.”
“That’s probably the right way to look at things,” I agreed. “But that girl, she sold the thing she absolutely shouldn’t’ve sold. She was only ten then, you couldn’t expect her to make a rational choice. And now the poor girl’s gotta keep hangin’ around desperate guys like you.”

“…So takin’ it back - you ain’t givin’ her any trouble, are you? Depending on your answer, your last months might get a helluva lot less comfy.”
I was getting increasingly fond of this guy.
“Oh, I think I’ve troubled her,” came my honest reply. “I’ve said things that’ve hurt her, and came close to physically harming her… and a little past that, I almost forced her to the ground.”
The man’s complexion changed, and as he looked like he was about throttle me any second, I held Miyagi’s notebook out to him.

“What’s this?”, he said, taking the notebook.
“You should find the details there. It’s the observation log Miyagi had. But you can’t have the subject himself reading it, right?”
“Observation log?” He licked his finger and opened the notebook.
“I dunno how your job goes, really, and it doesn’t seem to me that rules are too strict. But if it does happen that Miyagi might get punished for leaving this behind, well, I don’t want that. You seem like you’re on her side, so I’ll give it to you.”

The man flipped through the pages, skimming through. He reached the last page in about two minutes, and just said "Aha."
I didn't know what was in there. But after that, the man was a lot less aggressive.
Miyagi must have written favorably about me. I was glad to have indirect proof of that.

If I hadn't had the idea to buy a notebook of my own then, I wouldn't be writing this now.
After showing the man Miyagi's notebook, I had an urge to have my own. I went to the stationery shop and bought a Tsubame B5 notebook and a cheap fountain pen, then thought about what to put in it.

I knew that while I had this replacement observer around for two days, it was my time to do things that I couldn't do with Miyagi there.
At first I considered doing depraved things, but considered that when I next saw Miyagi, even if it didn't come up, I'd be visibly guilty. So I did things that I wouldn't want Miyagi to see, but in a healthy way.

I wrote a record of everything that had happened since I climbed the stairs of that old building and sold my lifespan on its fourth floor to the present day.

On the first page, I wrote about the morality lesson I'd received in elementary school. Without even thinking, I knew what I should write on the next page.
The first day I thought about the value of life. My belief at the time that I'd be famous someday. The promise I made with Himeno. Being told about the lifespan dealership at the bookstore and CD shop. Meeting Miyagi there.

The words flowed without stopping. As I smoked, using an empty can as an ashtray, I continued to spin the story.
The fountain pen made a comfortable sound on the paper. The room was hot, and sweat fell and blurred the letters.

"What're you writing?", the man asked.
"I'm recording what happened this month."
"And? Who's gonna read it?"
"Dunno. Doesn't really matter. Writing it helps me sort things out. I can move things around to more logical places, like a defrag."

Even late into the night, my hand wouldn't be stilled. It was far from being beautiful prose, but I was surprised how smoothly I could write.
After twenty-two hours, I finally came to a sudden halt. I didn't feel I could write any more today.

I put the fountain pen on the table and went to get some fresh air. The man begrudgingly got up and followed behind me.

Walking around aimlessly outside, I heard a taiko drum from somewhere. Practice for a festival, probably.

“Since you’re an observer, you sold your time too?”, I turned and asked the man.
“If I said yes, would ya sympathize with me?”, the man snorted with laughter.
“Yeah, I would.”
The man looked at me with surprise. “…Well, I’d like to tell ya I’m grateful, but truth is I didn’t sell no lifespan, no time, no health. I do this job 'cause I want to.”
“Bad taste. What’s so fun about it?”
“Didn’t say it was fun. It’s sorta like visiting people’s graves. I’m gonna die someday. Might as well experience as much death as I can so I can accept it.”
“Sounds like an old man’s idea.”
“Yeah, 'cause I am old,” the man said.

Back at the apartment, I took a bath, had a beer, brushed my teeth, and pulled up the covers to sleep. But it was once again noisy next door. Three or four people were talking with the window open.
I felt like there were always guests there, day or night. Big difference from my room which only had observers.
I wore headphones like earmuffs, turned off the light, and closed my eyes.
Maybe thanks to using a part of my brain I didn’t normally, I got eleven straight hours of sleep, not waking up once.

I spent the next day filling my notebook with words too. The radio was going on about baseball. By evening, I had caught up to the present.
My fingers trembled as I released the pen from them. The muscles in my arms and hands were screaming, and I rubbed my sore neck while my head ached.
Still, the feeling of accomplishment from finishing something wasn't bad. Also, re-explaining my memories through words made good memories easier to savor, and bad memories easier to accept.

I laid down on the spot and stared at the ceiling. There was a big black stain which I wasn't sure how it got there, and a bent nail jutting out. There was even a cobweb in the corner.
After watching a middle school baseball game at the local field, and going around a fair taking place at the market, I went to a cafeteria and got a leftover-ish dinner.
Miyagi'll be back tomorrow, I thought.

I decided to go to bed early. I closed the notebook I'd left open, put it on a bookshelf, and got into bed. Then the replacement observer spoke.
"This is somethin' I ask everyone, but… what'd you use your money for?"
"It didn't say in the observation log?"
"…Didn't read it in much detail."
"I walked down the road giving it out bill by bill," I answered.

“I used a little bit for living expenses, but the original plan was to give it to someone. But they ran off, so I decided I’d just give it all to strangers.”
“Bill by bill?”
“Yep. Just walked along handing out 10,000 yen bills.”

The man burst into uproarious laughter.
"Funny, huh?”, I said, but the man replied through chuckles,
“No, that’s not what I’m laughing at.”
It was a bizarre laugh. It didn’t seem like he was just laughing because it was funny.

“…Well, huh. So you ended up giving all that good money you got for your lifespan to strangers for free.”
“That’s what I did,” I nodded.
“No hope for a moron like you.”
“Agreed. There are countless better ways I could’ve used it. Could have done a lot with 300,000 yen.”
“Nope. *That’s* not even why I’m making fun of you.”
Something about the man’s wording seemed off.

Then he finally said this.
“Hey, you - don’t tell me - did you seriously believe it when they said your lifespan was worth 300,000 yen?”

The question shook me from my core.
“What do you mean?”, I asked the man.
“What else, I mean exactly what I said. Were you really told

your lifespan was 300,000 yen, and you were all, ah yes, that's exactly right, and took 300,000?"

"Well… yeah, I thought that was pretty low at first."
The man banged the floor in laughter.
"Right, right. Well, I don't want to say anything, but…" He held his stomach, still keeping in laughter.
"Well, next time you see that girl, you ask her. "Was my lifespan really worth 300,000 yen?""

I tried to question the man further, but he seemed unwilling to tell me any more.
In my pitch black room, I kept staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep.
I kept thinking about what his words meant.

"Good morning, Mr. Kusunoki."
Miyagi spoke as I woke up from the sun coming through the window.
This girl, who gave me a friendly smile from the corner of the room, was telling me a lie.

"How do you plan to spend today?"
I swallowed the words which had been moments away from leaving my throat.
I'll keep pretending I don't know anything, I decided. I didn't want to know the truth badly enough as to trouble Miyagi.

“The usual way,” I answered.
“Touring vending machines, then,” Miyagi happily said.

We drove everywhere - under blue skies, along paddy fields, down twisty rural roads.
We ate salt-broiled char and soft-serve ice cream at a roadside station, then took pictures along a strange street with no sign of people and lots of shuttered buildings, but plenty of vending machines.
Night came in the blink of an eye.

We got off the Cub at a small dam and went down the stairs to a walking path.
“Where are you headed?”
I didn’t turn around. “What would you do if I deceived you and went somewhere outrageous?”
“So you’re headed somewhere where one can see a beautiful sight?”, Miyagi said with understanding.
“You misunderstand,” I said, but it was as she said.

Once we crossed a small bridge that led to a thicket along the river, she seemed to understand my objective.
She seemed entranced by the sight.
“Um, this impression may sound like it’s missing the point, but… Fireflies really do glow, don’t they.”
“Duh, they’re fireflies,” I laughed, but I knew what she was trying to say. Miyagi was probably feeling the same way I felt seeing those stars at the lake.

You know that such a thing exists. But as much as you know about what it's *like*, the beauty a few steps higher is something that you might as well know nothing about until you see it for yourself.

We walked along the little path slowly while the lights of the countless green fireflies floating around flickered.
Staring right at them would make you lose focus and feel a little dizzy.

"If I'm to guess, this may be the first time I've seen fireflies," Miyagi said.
"There's been a lot less of them lately. They're hard to find if you don't go to the right place at the right time. I probably won't see them again here for days."
"You come here often, Mr. Kusunoki?"
"Nah. I only came here once, around this time last year. Just remembered that yesterday."

The luminescence of the fireflies hit its peak, and we went back the way we came.
"…May I interpret this as thanks for the night at the lake?", Miyagi asked.
"I just went to see it 'cause I wanted to. But you're free to interpret it however you want."
"Understood. I will interpret it freely. Very much so."
"Don't need to tell me every little thing."

I went back to the apartment, sorted out the pictures for the day, got ready for bed, responded to Miyagi's "good night" with the same, and just as I went to turn off the light, I called her name.
"Miyagi."
"Yes? What is it?"
"Why'd you lie?"

Miyagi looked up at my face and blinked.
"I'm not entirely sure what you mean."
"Let me make it a little simpler, then. …Was my lifespan really 300,000 yen?"

In the moonlight that night, I could sense a change in the color of Miyagi's eyes.
"Of course it is," she answered. "I'm sorry to say, but your worth simply isn't very much. I would have thought you'd accepted this some time ago."
"Well, I did. Until last night," I said.

Miyagi seemed to guess what my belief was.
"Did my substitute tell you something?", she asked mixed with a sigh.
"He just told me to check that with you, that's all. Didn't tell me anything more concrete than that."
"Yes, well, 300,000 yen is 300,000 yen." She continued to feign ignorance.

"…When I heard you'd lied to me, at first I simply thought you were taking a cut of the money I was supposed to get for yourself."
Miyagi looked at me with upturned eyes.

"I thought maybe it was 30 million or 3 billion, and you were embezzling me, telling me a fake value. That was my first thought. …But I just couldn't believe that. I didn't want to think that was it. That you'd been fooling me from the start. That you were hiding a lie like that behind your smile. I wondered if I was just making a fundamental mistake. I pondered that all night, until I realized. …I was mistaken from the very beginning."

That teacher had already told me, ten years ago.
I want you to get away from that line of thinking.

"Why did I believe that 10,000 yen for a year was the lowest possible price? Why did I believe that normal lifespans should sell for tens and hundreds of millions? Maybe I was basing too much on my prior opinions. Maybe everyone deeply wants to believe the nonsense about life being more valuable than anything. At any rate, I applied too much of my own common sense to the situation. I should have been more flexible in my thinking."

I took a breath, and said:

"What made you want to give a whole 300,000 yen to someone you'd never even seen before?"

Miyagi said "I don't have the faintest idea what you're saying" and turned away.
I sat in the opposite corner of the room in the same knees-up position as her. It made Miyagi smile a little.

"You can feign ignorance, that works," I said. "But I just want to say thanks."
Miyagi shook her head. "It's all right. If I kept this job up, I'd surely die before I paid the debt, just like my mother. Even if I were to pay it and was free, I'm not promised a good life afterward. So I decided it would be better to use the money this way."

"So how much am I worth, really?", I asked.
There was a pause.
"…Thirty yen," Miyagi whispered.

"A three-minute phone call," I laughed. "Sorry for using your 300,000 yen like that."
"Indeed. I do wish you would have used it more for yourself." Miyagi's wording felt angry, but her voice was gentle.

"…But I certainly understand how you feel, Mr. Kusunoki. Perhaps the reason I gave you that 300,000 yen and the reason you distributed it out to strangers are the same, at their core. I

felt lonely, sad, hollow, and desperate. So I went and did something unreasonably altruistic. …Though, thinking about it, if I hadn't lied about it being worth 300,000 yen and told the truth, perhaps you wouldn't have sold it. Then at least you would have been able to life a longer life. I'm sorry for what I did."

Miyagi spoke bending down and burying her chin among her knees, looking at her fingernails.
"Perhaps just once, I wanted to be the one giving someone something. I wanted it given to me, but… perhaps I tried to save myself by giving to someone in similarly pitiable circumstances what no one would give me. In any event, the action was a product of my warped good will. I'm sorry."

"That's not true," I denied. "If you told me "You're worth 30 yen" from the start, I'd get really nuts and sell off everything - maybe not even leave three days, much less three months. If you hadn't lied, I couldn't have gone touring vending machines, folding cranes, seeing the stars, or seeing fireflies."

"There was never any reason for you to despair. Thirty yen is merely a value decided by some higher-ups," Miyagi insisted.
"At least to me, Mr. Kusunoki, you are someone who is worth 30 million, or 3 billion yen."
"Stop it, that's such a weird consolation," I smiled.
"It's true!"
"If you're too kind to me, I'll just get miserable. I know that

you're a nice girl already, so you don't need to go any further."
"You're quite annoying. Just be quiet and let me cheer you up."
"…Never been told that before."
"Besides, this isn't consolation or kindness. I'm just telling you what I've been wanting to say. I do not care what you think of it," Miyagi said slightly embarrassed, her head low.

Then she told me this.
"Indeed, at first, I thought you were someone who deserved only thirty yen. When I gave you the 300,000, it was purely for my own satisfaction, so it didn't matter that it happened to be you, Mr. Kusunoki. …But gradually, my opinion changed. After the incident at the train station, you took my story to heart, didn't you? You sympathized with my situation of having to sell my time. Starting then, Mr. Kusunoki, you were no longer just my subject for observation. This alone is a significant problem, but afterward, there were many more.

"…I know it must be trifling to you, but I was glad that you were willing to talk to me. Because I've always been invisible. Being ignored was part of my job. Even little things like eating and talking with me at restaurants, going out shopping, just walking around town, holding hands and strolling down the river - they felt like a dream. You were the first person to always treat me like I was "there," no matter the time or the situation."

I wasn't sure what to respond with.

I never even thought that someone would be so grateful to me.
"…I can keep doing that if you like," I joked, and Miyagi nodded.
"I would love that. Since… I do love you."

Though it's no use loving someone who's soon to go away.
She smiled sadly.

My chest tightened, and my mouth didn't work for a while. Like I was experiencing a delay, I said nothing, not even able to blink.

"You know, Mr. Kusunoki. There are many other lies I've told you," Miyagi said in a slightly clouded voice. "Besides the value of your lifespan, and besides Himeno. For example, how your lifespan would be terminated if you caused others trouble. It was a lie. And how you would die if you went more than a hundred meters from me. Also a lie. They were all no more than ways to protect myself. Nothing but lies."

"…Is that right."
"If you are offended, you may do anything you wish to me."
"Anything?", I repeated.
"Yes, as terrible as you may desire."
"Then gladly."

I took Miyagi's hand to have her stand up, then hugged her tight.

I'm not sure how long we stayed like that.
I tried to remember them. Her soft hair. Her well-shaped ears. Her thin neck. Her unreliable shoulders and back. Her modest chest. Her smoothly-curved hips.
I used my senses to their utmost to commit it all to memory. So I'd remember no matter what. So I'd never forget again.

"That was quite terrible," Miyagi said, sniffling. "After doing that, now I know that I'll never forget you."
"Yeah. Mourn lots for me when I'm dead," I said.
"…If you're all right with it, then I'll do so until I die."
Then Miyagi smiled.

It was then when I finally found an objective for my meaningless last months.
Miyagi's words brought about an incredible change within me.

With not even two remaining months, I decided, no matter what it took, I would pay Miyagi's debt in full.

Me, whose whole life couldn't even buy a juice box.
I guess I could only say it because I just didn't know my place.

Chapter 13 – A Very Real Way

The story's nearing the end now. I've got less time to devote to writing this, so I'm not sure if it'll get cut off before the end or what.

It's too bad, but I think the writing'll have to be a little less detailed than before.

Though I'd made up my mind to repay Miyagi's debt, my blind idiocy wasn't something easily cured. But at least when it comes to what's to follow, maybe my misjudgment isn't too much to blame.
After all, it seemed impossible from the start. Her debt was a sum far greater than the salaryman's expenditures which Himeno once spoke of. There was no surefire way for a boring college student to make that much in two months.

But for the time being, I searched for one. Doing admirable work was something that seemed unrealistic in this case. No matter how hard I worked, having only two months to do so, it would be squeezing water from a stone.
I could arguably make back the 300,000 yen Miyagi gave me, but I didn't think she'd want me to labor away my last months like that. Similarly, she wouldn't want me to resort to anything criminal like larceny, robbery, fraud, or kidnapping. And because I was trying to earn the money for her, of course I wouldn't want to do it in any way she didn't approve of.

I considered gambling, but even I wasn't stupid enough to go through with that one. I knew very well that I wouldn't be winning any bets with my back to the wall like this. Gambling is something always won by those with money to spare.
If you reach out to the goddess of fortune, she runs away. You

have to tough it out and wait for her to approach, then catch her at just the right moment. But I didn't have time left for that, and I didn't have any sense for what the right moment was.

It was like trying to catch a cloud. If there were some amazing way to make a lifetime of money in two months, everyone would be doing it. Basically all I was doing was trying to check one more time something that everyone else would plainly state was impossible.
My only "weapon," so to speak, was the fact that with such little life left I could take any risk, but I wouldn't be the first person who's thrown their life away for money. And I could tell how that didn't pan out for them.

But I still kept thinking. Reckless, I know. But even if no one else had succeeded before, I just had to be the first.
I kept telling myself: Think, think, think. How can I pay the debt in the remaining two months? How can I ensure Miyagi will sleep peacefully? How can I ensure Miyagi won't be alone after I'm gone?

I pondered while walking around town. I sort of picked up in my twenty years of experience that it's best to walk around when you're thinking about something with no clear answer. I kept walking the next day, and the day after that. I hoped for an answer to come rolling at my feet.

I didn't eat much of anything during that time.
Again speaking from experience, I knew that at a certain level of hunger, my head cleared up; so I was counting on that.

It didn't take long for me to arrive at the thought of going to the shop again.
My last hope was the shop in that musty old building, that had once thrown me into the pits of despair, and still allowed me two more transactions.

One day I asked Miyagi. "Thanks to you, Miyagi, I'm a lot happier than I used to be. If I were to hypothetically sell my lifespan at that shop now, how much would it go for?"
"…As you predict, the values are fluid to some extent," Miyagi confirmed. "But unfortunately, a subjective sense of happiness will have little effect on the value of a lifespan. Their focus is on objectively measurable happinesses with a basis. …Though I question that approach."
"So then, what would add the most value?"
"Social contributions, popularity… I believe they favor things which are easily recognizable through objective means."
"Easily recognizable, huh."

"Um, Mr. Kusunoki?"
"What's up?"
"Please don't think of doing anything strange," Miyagi said with concern.
"I'm not thinking anything strange. I'm thinking perfectly

natural thoughts for this situation."

"…I believe I know more or less what you are considering," Miyagi said. "The majority of it is ways to repay my debt, yes? If so, then I'm glad. But while I am glad, I must say I don't want you to waste your remaining time. If you are trying to look out for my happiness… I'm terribly sorry, but that is a definite lapse of judgment."
"Just for reference, Miyagi, what's happiness for you?"
"…Pay attention to me," Miyagi pouted. "You haven't been talking to me much lately, have you?"

Miyagi was definitely right. What I was doing was a total misjudgment on my part.
But it didn't mean I'd give up that easily. I had resolve. I'd acquire easily-recognizable things like contributions to society and popularity.
Once I did, I could get more value from my life. That seemed to be so. Dare I say, I hoped I'd be famous enough that my name would be known by all.

I honestly didn't know which was more realistic - purely making money, or becoming someone who only had value in that his lifespan could sell for a high price.
I came to think that they were equally unrealistic. But I had nothing else, so I had to at least give it a try.

I was approaching the limits of what I could think up myself. I would need the imagination of others.
I first visited the old bookstore. I did tend to go there when I was troubled, after all. Casually looking through books that had nothing to do with the situation seemed to make most problems evaporate.
I figured it probably wouldn't work quite so well this time, but that day, I wouldn't be relying on books alone.

I called for the old owner, who was in the back listening to baseball relays on the radio, surrounded by piles of books on all sides. He raised his head and gave an unenergetic "Ah."
I decided not to touch upon the shop that dealt in lifespan. Though I did have some desire to find out just how much he knew about the shop, and above all I wanted to tell him about everything that had happened in the past month.
But if I were to talk about that, naturally my having only two months left would come up, and he might have felt guilty about it coming to that.

So I didn't mention anything about lifespan, and had an idle chat with him, for just this once acting like I didn't feel Miyagi's presence.
About the weather. About books. About baseball. About festivals. There wasn't much of note to speak of, but surprisingly, the conversation gave me a unique sense of ease. Maybe I liked this store, and this old man.

While Miyagi was busy staring at the bookshelves, I whispered a question to the old man.
“How do you think you can improve your own value?”

The owner - at last - turned down the volume on the radio.
“Hmm. Guess you just have to be reliable about doing things. That’s not something I can do, though. I guess you just see things you "can” do in front of you, and you get good at staying on top of them. That what I think at my age.“
"I see,” I nodded.

“But,” he said as if denying what he just said, “there’s something more important than that. And that’s not to trust the advice of somebody like me. Somebody who never achieved anything talking about success is just somebody who’s just blind to their own failings. So don’t follow my example. I can’t even understand why exactly I failed. Don’t have to show any respect to what a guy like that says.

”…People who’ve had lots of failures talk about those failures as if to imply that if they have another life, they’ll be a big success. After facing all that hardship, they think they won’t mess up again. But they’re all - me included, of course - making a fundamental mistake. Failures know a lot about failure, sure. But knowing failure is completely different from knowing success. Fixing your mistakes doesn’t mean success takes their place - you’ve just got a point to start at, is all. That’s something failures don’t understand.”

I found it a little funny remembering how Miyagi had said something very similar.
“They have only just arrived at the starting line. They have only just regained their composure after a long losing streak. Mistaking that as a chance to turn things around will do them no good.”

Lastly, he said:
“Hey, you thinking of selling your lifespan again?”
“What does that mean?”, I smiled innocently.

After leaving the bookstore, just the same as before, I entered the CD shop. The usual blond clerk greeted me kindly.
Here, too, I didn’t talk about lifespan, but just chatted about stuff like CDs I’d listened to lately.

Lastly, again finding a time when Miyagi wouldn’t hear, I asked:
“How do you think you can accomplish something in a short time?”

His reply came quick. “Guess you gotta depend on others, dude. ‘Cause a single guy can’t do that much on his own, yeah? Which means you gotta have someone else’s help. I don’t have a whole lotta faith in my own ability, tell you the truth. If it’s a problem I can’t tackle with, like, 80% of my all, I go straight to somebody else.”

It was advice I wasn't sure if I should take to heart or not.

Outside, it had suddenly started raining heavily, as it does in the summer.
I went to leave the store prepared to get soaked, but the clerk lent me a vinyl umbrella.

"I dunno what's goin' on, but if you wanna accomplish something, don't forget about your health," he said.
I thanked him, put up the umbrella, and walked home with Miyagi. It was a small umbrella, so our shoulders got soaking wet.
People watching looked at me quizzically - they saw an idiot holding an umbrella the wrong position.

"I like this," Miyagi laughed.
"What do you like?", I asked.
"Well, essentially… Despite how comical it looks to others, you letting your shoulder get wet is a very kind gesture. I like that sort of thing."
"Oh," I said, my cheeks getting a little red.
"You're a shameless shy man," Miyagi said, poking my shoulder.

By this point, I didn't just not care what people thought of me, I enjoyed being treated like a weirdo.
Because it would make Miyagi happy, too. Because the more comical I looked, the more it would make Miyagi smile.

I took shelter from the rain with Miyagi under a shop overhang. I heard thunder in the distance, rain pouring out of the gutter, and squishing inside my wet shoes.
There, I saw a familiar face. The man, walking quickly with a dark blue umbrella, looked up at me and stopped.
He was a guy in my department at school who I knew well enough to exchange greetings with.

“Been a while,” he said with cold eyes. “Where the hell have you been? Haven’t seen you on campus at all lately.”
I put my hand on Miyagi’s shoulder and said, “I’ve been going around with this girl. Her name’s Miyagi.”

“Not funny,” he said, clearly displeased. “You’re such a creep.”
“Can’t stop you from thinking that,” I replied. “I’m sure I’d say the same thing in your position. But Miyagi’s here, all right. And she’s real cute. I’ll respect that you don’t believe it, so I want you to respect that I do.”
”…I always knew it, but man, you really are deranged, Kusunoki. You’re always hiding in your husk instead of interacting with people, huh? How about a peek at the outside world?“
Then he left, fed up with me and stunned.

I sat on the bench and watched the raindrops. It soon started to clear up, seemingly only a brief shower. We squinted at the

light off the wet ground.
"Um… Thank you for that," Miyagi said, leaning on my shoulder.
I put my hand on her head and ran my fingers through her smooth hair.

Be "reliable," huh?
I mouthed the advice of the old man at the bookstore. Though he'd told me I shouldn't trust him, the words seemed to have meaning to me now.

Maybe the idea of paying back her debt was too much of a stretch. Thinking about it, there was something I could do that would make Miyagi happy in a very real way.
It was like she'd told me herself - to "pay attention to her." Simply being treated like an oddity by those around me gave her considerable delight.
It was right in front of me all this time - so why didn't I do it?

Miyagi spoke at such a time that she seemed to see the change in my thoughts.
"Mr. Kusunoki? I'm truly, truly glad that you would use what little remains of your life to help me. …But it's not necessary. Because you've saved me long ago. Even once decades have passed without you, I believe I'll be able to think back on the days I spent with you, and laugh and cry. I believe just having memories like that will make living somewhat easier. So you've done enough. Please, forget about the debt."

“Instead,” Miyagi said, shifting her weight toward me.
“Instead, give me memories. For after you’re gone, when I feel hopelessly alone, to warm myself with again and again - as many as you can.”

And that was how I’d decided that I was to end my life as the most foolish person you ever did meet.
But you’ll see, should you read this to the end, how it was ironically the wisest decision I made in my entire life.

Miyagi and I got on a bus for a park with a big pond.
Most would raise their eyebrows or burst out laughing when they heard what I did there.

I rented a boat on the lake. While there were simple rowboats, I dared to rent one of those ridiculous swan boats.
Since I appeared to be alone, the clerk on the dock gave me a bewildered look as if to say “Alone?” - normally only lovers or pairs of girls would ride them.
I turned to Miyagi and smiled, “Okay, let’s go!”, and the clerk’s face stiffened. There was some amount of terror in his eyes.

Miyagi couldn’t help laughing at how funny it was the entire time we were on the boat.
“I mean, to them it looks like an adult male riding one of these alone, yes?”

“Can’t be that stupid. I mean, how fun is this?”, I laughed.
We slowly toured the lake. Amid the sounds of the water, Miyagi whistled “Stand By Me.” It was a tranquil summer afternoon.

There were Yoshino cherry trees planted all around the perimeter of the lake. In spring, surely the lake would be covered with cherry petals.
On the other hand, in winter, the lake would be mostly frozen and the swan boats would be retired, the real swans taking their place.
It was a somewhat lonely thought, as a person who would never see spring nor winter again. But looking at Miyagi smiling beside me, it quickly stopped mattering.

It didn’t end with the boat. I did one ridiculous act after another over the next few days. To put it simply, I did everything you’re not supposed to do alone. Of course, I was doing it with Miyagi, but no one else saw it that way.
The one-man Ferris wheel. The one-man merry-go-round. The one-man picnic. The one-man aquarium visit. The one-man zoo visit. The one-man see-saw. The one-man pool. The one-man toast at a bar. The one-man barbecue.
Nearly anything that would be embarrassing to do alone, I did it. And whatever I was doing, I would always actively say Miyagi’s name, walk holding hands with her, make eye contact with her, and generally try to insist on her existence.
Whenever I ran low on money, I’d spend a few days doing

part-time jobs, and then go have fun again.

I didn't notice at the time, but I was gradually becoming an infamous celebrity in the small town.
Naturally, there were people who sneered, bluntly looked away, and furrowed their eyebrows, but on the other hand, some thought of me as a pantomime trying to show off his skills, or interpreted my actions as a thought exercise.
No, not only that - apparently some people's hearts were soothed when they saw me, and I actually made people happy.
The response truly was varied.

Surprisingly, the proportion of those who got a bad impression and those who got a good impression were pretty equal.
Why did nearly half of people feel better seeing my idiotic actions? Maybe the reason was surprisingly simple.
Because I looked like I was having the time of my life.
That might have been it.

"Mr. Kusunoki, is there anything you'd like me to do?", Miyagi asked one morning.
"What's this all of a sudden?"
"I felt that you've been giving me everything. I'd like to occasionally give something to you."
"I don't remember doing anything that big, but I'll keep it in mind," I said. "But Miyagi, is there anything you want me to do for you?"

“There isn’t. My wish is to know what your wish is.”
“Then my wish is to know your wish.”
“Thus it is my wish to know your wish, Mr. Kusunoki.”

After we pointlessly repeated that four times, Miyagi spoke with resignation.
“Before, you asked me what I would do if I had months to live, and I gave you three answers, yes?”
“Starry Lake, your grave, childhood friend.”
“Yes.”
“You wanna meet your childhood friend, then?”

Miyagi nodded apologetically. “Thinking on it, I do not know when I’ll die. Thus, I thought that it may be best to visit him soon, while I still know where he is. Though we will not be meeting, only me seeing him. …Will you accompany me?”
“Yeah, of course.”
“Please tell me your wish soon, Mr. Kusunoki.”
“Once I think of one.”

We quickly checked out the transportation we’d need to take to her destination and arranged to visit Miyagi’s hometown. While riding the bus along hilly roads, she looked out the window nostalgically.
“I’m sure I’ll be disappointed. My wish is very unrealistic, selfish, and childish. A wish of "I never want anything to change” has never once been heard. …But even my memories may be spoiled, I feel I can endure it now. Because you’re here,

Mr. Kusunoki.“

"Because misery loves company.”
“That’s not what I meant at all. Are you stupid?”
“I know, my bad,” I said, then stroked Miyagi’s head. “Like this, right?”
“Like that,” Miyagi nodded.

It was a small town. The shopping district was all appliance stores, there were long lines at the register at small chain supermarkets, students with nowhere to go gathered at the community center - that kind of town.
It lacked personality no matter what slice you took out of it, but now, it was all beautiful to me. I no longer needed to just take a quick, efficient glance at the world, nor blame my wretchedness on it. I could afford to stop and look at things how they were.
Looking at the world without a hint of any grudge, it was as vivid as if I’d peeled off a clear membrane that had covered everything.

Unusually, Miyagi was the one leading me that day. She knew that her childhood friend lived in this town, but didn’t know what house he lived in.
I’ll look for places where it seems he might be, Miyagi said.
Apparently his name was Enishi.

When we finally found Enishi, Miyagi didn't approach him right away. At once, she hid behind my back, timidly put her head out, and gradually drew near until at last standing beside him.
It was in a puny station that would feel cramped if there were ten people inside. Enishi was sitting on a bench in a corner, reading a book.

He was a bit more blessed in his posture and face than most, but his expression deserved special mention. It was a relaxed expression as if to cover a kind of self-confidence. I'd recently begun to understand what it took to create such a look.
In essence, it was an expression that could only be had by those with the confidence from loving someone and being loved.
I could tell just from the mood that Enishi wasn't waiting for a train, but for someone coming off of one.

I figured Miyagi didn't want to see who that "someone" was. I checked the time and whispered "Guess we better get going," but Miyagi shook her head.
"Thank you. But I want to watch. I want to see what kind of person he loves now."

A two-car train arrived. Most of the passengers that spilled out were high school students, but one was an agreeable woman in her middle twenties.
I could predict that she was the person Enishi was waiting for

even before they exchanged friendly smiles.

The woman had a very natural smile. So natural that it nearly wasn't.
Most people's smiles are at least somewhat forced no matter how natural they appear, but hers showed no trace of being unnatural. Maybe it was simply the result of smiling very often.

Since they naturally came together without saying a word, it seemed they had been dating for a while. But from the happiness on their faces the instant they saw each other, it was like they'd only just had a rendezvous for the first time.
It only lasted seconds, but that was enough to know that they were happy.
Enishi was getting on happily without Miyagi.

Miyagi looked at them emotionlessly, not crying or laughing.
Maybe I was the one who was more disturbed. I could see myself and Himeno in Enishi and his girlfriend. Though only for a moment, I pictured a peaceful, happy future that perhaps could have been.
A future I may not have been satisfied simply dying in.

The couple left, and only Miyagi and I remained inside.
"I'd actually considered doing a number of things, despite how they couldn't see me," Miyagi said. "But I changed my mind."
"Like what?", I asked.

“Like forcibly hugging him. That sort of thing.”
“Like that, huh. Well, if I were in that position, I’d do more than that.”
“Such as?”

Before Miyagi could finish saying those two words, I wrapped my arms around her hips and showed her “more than that.”
We stayed that way for about two minutes.
Though Miyagi initially stiffened from surprise, she gradually calmed down and responded similarly.

When our lips parted, I said, “If nobody’s gonna blame me, then sure, I’m gonna do selfish stuff like this.”
“…Indeed. No one will blame you,” Miyagi finally said, her head still lowered.

Chapter 14 – The Blue Period

A definite change started to take place when my lifespan went below fifty days.
As I said before, there were lots of people who took offense to my actions, which were both famous and infamous. There were numerous people who would see me happily talking to an invisible person, and say cruel things loud enough for me and passersby to hear.
Of course, I had no right to complain. I was the one who made them feel unpleasant in the first place.

One day, at a bar, I got involved with three men. They were loud, sharp-eyed, always taking opportunities to make

themselves look tough, and from their numbers and stature I knew I needed to be careful about offending them.
Probably out of boredom, when they saw me drinking alone and talking to an empty seat, they purposefully sat next to me and talked to me, trying to provoke me.
Maybe at one point I would have tried to stand up for myself and say something back, but I just couldn't devote energy to that anymore, so I waited it out until they got bored.

But they didn't get bored - upon realizing I wasn't saying anything back, they took advantage of it to up the attitude even further.
I considered leaving the bar, but seeing how much time they seemed to have on their hands, I thought they might just follow me.
"This is problematic," Miyagi said with a concerned look.

Just as I was worrying about what to do, I heard a voice from behind say "Huh? Is that you, Mr. Kusunoki?"
It was a man's voice. I couldn't identify anyone who talked to me like that, so I was surprised enough as it was, but what he followed with made both Miyagi and I too stunned to speak.
"You're with Ms. Miyagi again today?"

I turned to look. I did indeed know this man.
He was the man who lived next door at the apartment. The man who'd always given me a disturbed look watching me go in and out while talking to Miyagi.

I seemed to remember his name was Shinbashi.

Shinbashi walked right up to me, turned to one of the guys bothering me, and said “I’m very sorry, but could you give up this seat?”
His words were polite, but his tone was oppressive. Shinbashi was over six foot and looked at him like he was used to threatening people, so the man he spoke to changed his attitude very quickly.

Once Shinbashi sat next to me, he faced not me, but Miyagi. “I always hear about you from Mr. Kusunoki, but I’ve never talked to you myself. Nice to meet you. I’m Shinbashi.”
Miyagi’s face was frozen in shock, but Shinbashi nodded as if she’d made some kind of reply. “Yes, that’s right. I’m honored you remember. We’ve passed by in the apartment many times.”
It wasn’t much of a conversation. Thus it was clear that Shinbashi couldn’t actually see Miyagi.
Maybe this man is just “pretending” he can see Miyagi, I thought.

The men pestering me seemingly gave up with Shinbashi’s appearance and prepared to leave. Once the three were gone, Shinbashi sighed with relief and threw away his polite smile for his usual sullen look.
“Let me just say first,” Shinbashi clarified, “I don’t necessarily believe this "Miyagi” girl honestly exists.“

"I know. You were just helping, huh?", I said. “Thanks, I’m grateful.”
He shook his head. “No, it’s not really that either.”
“Then what is it?”

“You may not admit this, but… at least personally, this is what I think. I see what you’re doing as sort of a performance, attempting to fool as many people as you can into believing this "Miyagi” really exists. You’re attempting to prove through perfect pantomime that people’s common sense can be shaken. …And that attempt has succeeded on me somewhat.“

"You mean you feel Miyagi’s existence to an extent?”
“I don’t like to admit it, but I believe so,” Shinbashi said, shrugging his shoulders. “And while I’m at it, I’m somewhat interested in the change taking place within myself. I wonder that if I were to actively accept "Ms. Miyagi’s” existence like you’re causing me to, I’ll eventually be able to see her for real.“

"Miyagi,” I began, “isn’t that tall. She has fair skin, and I would say she’s more delicate than not. Usually she has sober eyes, but sometimes she’ll show a modest smile. Her eyes are a little bad, but when she needs to read small writing, she wears thinly-framed glasses, and they suit her really well. Her hair’s shoulder-length, and tends to curl in at the ends.”

“…I wonder why,” Shinbashi said, tilting his head. “Every single one of those characteristics matches how I imagined

Miyagi."
"Miyagi's right in front of you now. Why do you think that is?"
Shinbashi closed his eyes and thought. "I'm not sure of that part."
"She wants a handshake," I said. "Hold out your right hand, will you?"

He did so, his face half-doubting, half-believing. Miyagi looked at the hand gladly and grabbed it with both of hers.
Watching his own hand shake up and down, Shinbashi said, "Am I to believe Ms. Miyagi is shaking my hand?"
"Yep. You think you're moving it yourself, but actually, Miyagi's shaking it. Seems pretty happy about it."

"Would you tell Mr. Shinbashi "thank you very much"?", Miyagi requested.
"Miyagi told me to say "thank you very much"," I conveyed.
"I somehow felt she might," Shinbashi said with wonder.
"Don't mention it."

With me as an intermediary, Miyagi and Shinbashi exchanged a few more words.
Before going back to the table he had been at before, Shinbashi turned back and told me this.

"I somehow doubt that I'm the only one who can sense Ms. Miyagi's presence at your side. I think everyone feels it temporarily, but simply dismisses it as a stupid illusion. But if

there's an opportunity - such as learning that they're not the only one feeling that illusion - I wonder if Ms. Miyagi's existence might be very quickly accepted by everyone. …Of course, what I'm saying has no basis. But I hope to be right."

Shinbashi *was* right.

It was hard to believe, but after that event, people around us started to accept Miyagi's existence.
Of course, it wasn't that people seriously believed in the existence of this invisible person. It was more like people accepted my nonsense, like a mutual agreement, and played along with it.
Miyagi's existence didn't quite reach the level of "supposedly exists," but still, it was definitely a big change.

While we frequently made appearances as the town's places of amusement, the high school culture festival, and other local festivals, I became a little bit famous.
As someone who enjoyed a comical happiness, I came to be treated as a pitiable, but amusing person. More than a few people came to watch me, holding hands with and hugging my fictional girlfriend, in a warm way.

One night, Miyagi and I were invited to Shinbashi's place.
"I have some alcohol left at my apartment, and I have to drink it all before I go home. …Mr. Kusunoki, Ms. Miyagi, would you

drink it with me?”

We went into the neighboring room and found three of his friends already drinking. One man, two women.
The drunks had already heard about me from Shinbashi, and they asked one question after another about Miyagi. I answered each and every one.

“So li'l Miyagi’s right here?”, asked Suzumi, a tall girl with heavy makeup who was drunkenly touching Miyagi’s arm.
“Now that you say it, I feel like she is.”
She couldn’t sense anything through touch, but maybe Miyagi’s presence wasn’t completely gone. Miyagi softly held Suzumi’s hand.

A quick-thinking man named Asakura had a few questions for me about Miyagi, trying to catch me on an inconsistency.
But he found it interesting how everything matched up, and started doing things like putting the cushion he was using where Miyagi was, and giving her a glass of alcohol.
“I like that kind of girl,” Asakura said. “It’s probably a good thing I can’t see Ms. Miyagi, or else I’d soon fall for her.”
“Doesn’t matter either way. Miyagi likes me.”
“Don’t go saying things like that,” Miyagi said, hitting me with a cushion.

Riko, a short girl with a neat face who was the most drunk, looked up at me while lying on the floor.

“Misser Kusunoki, Misser Kusunoki, show us how much you like Ms. Miyagi!”, she said with sleepy eyes.
“I wanna see too,” Suzumi agreed. Shinbashi and Asakura gave me expectant glances.

“Miyagi,” I called.
“Yes?”
I kissed Miyagi on her slightly-reddened face. The drunks gave a cheer.
I was surprised myself what an absurd thing I was doing. None of the people here honestly believed in Miyagi’s existence.
They must have thought of me as a crazed, happy fool.

But what was wrong with that?
That summer, I was the best clown in town. For better or worse.

Some days passed after that, until one sunny afternoon.
The doorbell rang, and I heard Shinbashi’s voice. When I opened the door, he threw something at me. I caught it in my palm and looked - they were car keys.

“I’m going home,” Shinbashi said. “So I won’t need it for a while. You can borrow it if you want. How about going to the beach or mountains with Ms. Miyagi?”
I thanked him again and again.

As he was leaving, Shinbashi said this.
“You know, I just can’t see you as a liar. I really can’t believe that Ms. Miyagi is just a fabrication of some pantomime. … Maybe by some chance there really is a world that only you can see. Maybe the world as the rest of us see it is only a small part of what’s really there, only the things that we’re allowed to see.”

After seeing him get on the bus and leave, I looked up at the sky.
As ever, the sunlight was dizzying. But I smelled a faint trace of autumn in the air.
The tsukutsuku-boushi were crying all at once, bringing an end to summer.

At night, I slept in the bed with Miyagi. The border between the sides had at some point vanished.
Miyagi slept facing me. It was a sound sleep, as peaceful as a child’s. I adored her face in sleep, never getting used to it, never getting tired of it.

I left the bed, careful not to wake her. I drank some water in the kitchen, and when I went back to my room, I noticed the sketchbook on the floor in front of the dressing room door.
I picked it up, turned on the light by the sink, and slowly opened to the first page.

There was much more drawn in there than I’d expected.

The waiting room at the train station. The restaurant where I met Naruse. The elementary school where the time capsule was buried. My and Himeno's secret base. The room flooded with a thousand paper cranes. The old library. The stands at the summer festival. The riverfront we walked down the day before I met Himeno. The viewing platform. The community center we stayed at. The Cub. The candy store. A vending machine. A public phone. Starry Lake. The old bookstore. The swan boat. The Ferris wheel.

And me sleeping.

I turned to a new page and started drawing Miyagi sleeping in return.
Probably because of my drowsiness, I didn't realize it had been years since I'd drawn any art without stopping until after I was done.
Art, which I'd thought was only frustrating.

When I looked at my completed drawing, I was filled with a surprising sense of satisfaction. But I also had a tiny feeling that something was amiss.
It was easy to overlook. It was minor enough that if I just thought about something else for a moment, it would go away entirely.
I could have ignored it, closed the sketchbook, put it beside the bed near Miyagi, and been able to sleep happily awaiting her

reaction in the morning.

But I was sure of something.
I concentrated to the best of my ability. I strained my senses to find the source of the wrongness.
I reached for it like a letter floating in a dark, stormy sea, my hand slipping as I tried to grab it.

After a few dozen minutes, as I pulled my hand back in defeat, it landed right in my palm.
I very, very carefully lifted it out of the water. And suddenly, I understood.

The next moment, as if possessed, I intently moved the pencil across the sketchbook.
I continued for the entire night.

A few days later, I took Miyagi to see some fireworks. Walking the sunset footpath, crossing the railroad tracks, going through the shopping district, we arrived at the elementary school.
It was a famous local fireworks display, and it was a bigger affair than I expected, with many more carts. There were enough visitors as to make me wonder how the town had room for all these people.

When children saw me walking and holding hangs with

Miyagi, they laughed “It’s Mr. Kusunoki!”
They were laughs of approval. Weirdos are popular with kids too. I raised the hand I was holding Miyagi’s with in response to their jeers.

While in line for grilled chicken, a group of boys in high school approached and teased “What a girl you’ve got there!”
“Great, isn’t she? Well you can’t have her,” I said, holding Miyagi’s shoulder, and they guffawed.

That made me happy. Even if they didn’t believe it, everyone enjoyed my “Miyagi’s right there!” nonsense.
It was much better to imagine that I had a fictitious girlfriend than to think I was really alone.

The announcement came that the show was starting, and a few seconds later, the first firework went up.
Orange light filled the sky, the crowd cheered, and the delayed sound shook the air.

It had been a long time since I’d seen fireworks up close. Compared to my expectations, they were much bigger, much more colorful, and disappeared much quicker.
I’d also forgotten that the huge fireworks take a few seconds to spread out, and hadn’t even imagined how much the explosive sound reverberated in the pit of your stomach.

Dozens of fireworks went up. We laid behind a building where

we could be alone, watching them.
Suddenly, I wanted to sneak a look at her face, and once I saw her in the moment the sky was lit up, it seemed she was thinking the same, and our eyes met.

“We’re a good match,” I laughed. “That’s happened before. In the bed.”
“So it did,” Miyagi shyly smiled. “But you can see me anytime, Mr. Kusunoki, so you should watch the fireworks.”
“Incidentally, that may not be true.”

Maybe my timing could have been better.
I would be laying myself bare in the fireworks’ glare.

“Well, you’re right that I have tomorrow off, but I will be back the day after. Unlike last time, it will only be one day I’m gone.”
“That’s not the problem.”
“Then what is the problem?”

“…Hey, Miyagi. I’m kind of popular in town. Half the smiles I get are sneers, but the other half come from pure fondness. Whatever sorts of smiles they are, I’m proud. I was convinced something this good would never happen.”
I lifted myself up and looked down at Miyagi with my hands on the ground.

“When I was in elementary school, there was this guy I hated.

He was actually really smart, but he hid it and acted like a fool to get people to like him. …But recently, I've come to understand. I couldn't help being envious of him. I think I wanted to do what he was doing from the start. And thanks to you, Miyagi, I made it happen. I succeeded at making friends with the world."
"Isn't that a good thing?" Miyagi raised herself and took the same position.

"…So what are you really trying to say?"
"Thanks for everything, I suppose," I said. "I really don't know what to say."
"And for everything to come, yes?", Miyagi questioned. "You still have over a month left. It seems a bit soon for "thanks for everything.""

"Hey, Miyagi? You said you wanted to know my wish, and I promised I'd tell you when I thought of it."
There were seconds of pause.
"Yes. I'll do anything that I can."
"Okay. Then I'll be honest. Miyagi, when I die, forget about me completely. That's my meager wish."
"No."

After her immediate reply, Miyagi seemed to guess at my intention.
She picked up on what I was going to do tomorrow.

“…Um, Mr. Kusunoki. I’m sure you wouldn’t, but please don’t do anything stupid. I’m begging you.”

I shook my head.
“Think about it. Who would have expected thirty-yen me to live such wonderful final days? Probably nobody. Not even you could have predicted it from reading my evaluation or whatever. I should’ve lived the worst life imaginable, but I got some serious happiness. So then your future is just as uncertain, Miyagi. Maybe someone else reliable will show up and make you much happier.”

“They won’t.”
“But you never should’ve showed up for me either, Miyagi. So then -”
“They won’t!”
Without leaving me time to respond, Miyagi pushed me to the ground.
As I laid flat, she buried her face in my arm.

“…Mr. Kusunoki, I’m begging you.”
It was the first time I’d heard her speak through tears.

“I’m begging you, stay with me for at least this last month. I can put up with everything else. The fact that you’ll die soon, the fact I can’t see you on my days off, the fact that others can’t see us holding hands, the fact that I’ll have to live alone thirty years more, all of it. So at least for now - at least while you’re

with me, don't throw yourself away. I'm begging you."

I stroked Miyagi's head as she wailed.
Back at the apartment, Miyagi and I slept holding each other.
Her tears didn't stop to the very end.

Miyagi left the apartment in the middle of the night.
We hugged again at the front door, and she parted from me with hints of regret, giving me a lonely smile.
"Goodbye. You made me happy."
With that, she bowed her head and turned away.
She walked slowly into the moonlight.

The next morning, I headed to the old building with my replacement observer.
The place where Miyagi and I first met.

And there, I sold thirty days of my lifespan.
In truth, I was going to sell absolutely all of it. But they wouldn't let you sell those final three days.

The observer looked at the results and was shocked.
"Did you come here knowin' this was gonna happen?"
"Yep," I said.

The thirty-some woman at the counter who audited me looked

bewildered.
“…I honestly can’t recommend this. At this point, money can’t be that much of a concern, can it? After all… in the next thirty days, you’re going to paint pictures that end up in art textbooks for years to come.”

She looked toward the sketchbook I held at my side.
"Listen carefully. If you leave here without doing this, you’ll have thirty-three days left to fervently paint. In that time, your observer will always be there, giving you courage. She absolutely won’t blame you for your choice. And after death, your name will survive in the history of art forever. You should know all that yourself, shouldn’t you? …Just what about that dissatisfies you? I can’t understand.”

“Just like money is pointless once I die, so is fame.”
“Don’t you want to be eternal?”
“Even if I am eternal in a world without me, that’s nothing to be glad about,” I said.

“The world’s plainest pictures.”
That’s what my paintings were called, and while they caused a lot of dispute, they ultimately sold for very high prices.
But of course, since I’d sold those thirty days, that was “no longer a possibility, but a thing that would now never happen.”

This is what I thought. Maybe in my original life, over a really long period of time, my ability to draw that kind of art would eventually blossom. And just before that happened, I was destined to lose my chance because of the bike accident.
But by selling my lifespan, and most importantly by having Miyagi there, the huge amount of time I originally wasn't given was shortened to the extreme. Thanks to that, my talent could bloom before my lifespan ended.
That was my thought.

I used to be very proficient at art.
I could copy scenery in front of me as accurately as a photo like it was nothing, and used my understanding of that to naturally master switching it to another form without anyone teaching me.
At galleries, I could look at a painting and plainly understand, in some place very distant from language, why "something that shouldn't have been painted so" was "something that had to be painted so."
My way of looking at things wasn't completely correct. But the fact I had an incredible talent was something anyone who knew me at the time had to recognize.

In the winter when I was 17, I gave up on art. I thought that continuing on in the way I had been, I wouldn't be famous like I promised Himeno. At best, I could be a "jack of all trades" sort of artist.

Though that would have been considerable success in the eyes of most, to keep my promise with Himeno, I had to be outrageously special. I needed revolution. So I wouldn't allow myself to just keep drawing on momentum.
The next time I picked up a paintbrush would be once everything had come together within me. Until I could capture the world in a viewpoint totally unlike everyone else's, I wouldn't let myself paint.
That was what I decided.

Maybe that decision in itself wasn't mistaken. But in the summer when I was 19, I still hadn't solidified my view of things, so out of haste, I again picked up the brush.
It wasn't until long afterward that I realized it was a time when I absolutely shouldn't have been drawing.
As a result, I lost my ability to draw. I couldn't even draw a proper apple. As soon as I thought to draw something, I was filled with outrageous confusion. Like I was going to scream. I was attacked with anxiety like stepping out into air. I no longer had a sense for what lines and what colors I needed.

I realized I had lost my talent. Furthermore, I didn't have any will to struggle and get it back. It was too late to start from scratch. I dropped my brush, ran from the competition, and retreated inside.
At some point, I became too desperate to have my art approved of by everyone. I think that was the primary cause of my confusion.

The mistake of trying to draw for everyone was a severe one. When that mistake reached its peak, it created a situation of not being able to draw.
Universality isn't what's going to get people's favor. You get that when you go deep into the well of yourself, toil to bring something back, and produce something that's wholly individual at a glance.

To notice that required me to be rid of all concerns, and just for pure enjoyment, draw for *myself*.
And it was Miyagi who gave me that opportunity. With her as my subject, I could "draw" in a realm completely different from what I considered "drawing" to mean before.

After that, I spent all night drawing landscapes, the ones I had pictured before I slept every night since I was five.
The world I wanted to live in, memories that I'd never had, a somewhere I'd never been, a someday that could have been past or future.
I didn't even realize it, but I had long been piling them up. And it was drawing Miyagi that made me understand how to express them.
Maybe I'd been awaiting that moment. Though it was only just before my death, my talent was finally perfected.

According to the woman who did my evaluation, the paintings I was to create in my last thirty days were "paintings that even de Chirico would consider too sentimental."

That was the only explanation she gave me, but I thought, yeah, that does sound like the sort of stuff I'd make.

Selling the part of my life in which I'd paint those and get my name in a little corner of history fetched me a ridiculous sum that made me doubt my eyes.
With just thirty days, I came just short of fully repaying Miyagi's debt. Still, she would be free in three more years of work.

"Thirty days more valuable than thirty years, huh?", the observer laughed as we parted.
And so I denied eternity.

The summer Himeno once made a prediction of was drawing to a close.
Her prediction was half-wrong.
Not even in the end was I ever rich, ever famous.
But her prediction was half-right.
"Something really good" happened, all right. And like she said, deep down, I could be "glad I lived."

Chapter 15 – The Gift of the Magi

It was the first morning of the remaining three days.
I wouldn't have an observer's eyes on me.
Thus, Miyagi was gone.

I decided how I'd spend those three days a while ago. In the morning, I filled up the notebook.
Once I was done writing events up to yesterday, I put down the pen and took a few hours to sleep.
When I woke up, I went out to smoke, then bought a cider from a vending machine for my thirst.

I looked back at my bed.
One hundred and eighty-seven yen. That was all. And sixty yen of it was in 1-yen coins.
Three times I counted it. One hundred and eighty-seven yen.

Realizing a strange coincidence, my cheeks burned. Passing the three days would be a somewhat uncertain business, but for now I enjoyed that happenstance.
Looking back at the notebook and adding important details, I got on the Cub and went around to the places I went with Miyagi, but this time I really was alone.

I drove under a blue sky as if in search of her lingering scent.
I wondered if Miyagi was off observing someone else now.
I prayed that they wouldn't attack Miyagi out of desperation.
I prayed that Miyagi could keep working until she paid her debt, and live such a happy life that she forgot all about me.
I prayed that someone would appear who Miyagi found more important than me, and who found Miyagi more important than I had.

While walking in the park, children waved to me. Getting a sudden idea, I pretended that Miyagi was there.
I put out my hand, said “Look, Miyagi!”, and held an imaginary Miyagi’s hand.

It was the same as always for everyone else. “Ah, that idiot Kusunoki’s walking with his imaginary girlfriend again.”
But it was very different for me. In fact, it was hardly the same at all.
As I went on doing this to myself, I was hit with such sadness I could barely stand up. I realized Miyagi’s absence more than ever.

I had a thought.
What if it had all been an illusion of mine from the start?

I was convinced my life would end in three days. I knew that all but a shred of my life had been used up. That sensation couldn’t have been a lie.
But did that girl named Miyagi really exist? Had not only her existence, but the existence of a shop dealing in lifespan, been a convenient fantasy of mine as I recognized my coming death?
I had no way of knowing that now.

I sat on the edge of a fountain with my head low, and was called to by a boy and girl in middle school.
The boy innocently asked, “Mr. Kusunoki, how’s Ms. Miyagi?”

“Miyagi’s not here anymore,” I said.

The girl put her hands to her mouth, shocked.
“Huh? What happened? Did you have a fight?”
“Something like that. Don’t fight, you two.”

The two looked at each other and shook their heads in unison.
“Well, I dunno… I mean, even Mr. Kusunoki and Ms. Miyagi argue?”
“If you two get along so well but still fight, then there’s no way we wouldn’t.”

I wanted to say "You know, that’s true.” But the words wouldn’t come out.
Before I knew it, I was crying like a dam had burst. The more I tried to imagine Miyagi beside me to comfort myself, the more the tears came.
The two sat around me in my indecency and tried to console me.

Then, surprisingly, I found that there were far more people who knew about me than I thought.
People of all ages crowded around the scene, as if to say “Kusunoki’s doing something new.”

Shinbashi’s friends Suzumi and Asakura were there. Suzumi asked me what had happened.
I wasn’t sure how to answer, so I told them that Miyagi and I

had fought and split up. I made up a story about how she had turned her back on me and abandoned me.

“What about Kusunoki didn’t Miyagi like?”, a high school girl with sharp eyes said angrily. She really spoke like she believed Miyagi existed.
“Why, did something happen?”, said a man beside her. I remembered his face.
That’s right - he was the owner of the photo studio. The first person to acknowledge Miyagi existed.

“She didn’t seem like the kind of person to do something so cruel.”
“But does that mean she’s gone?”, Suzumi asked.
A young man in a tank-top said to me, “That Miyagi’s a good-for-nothing girl, ditching a good guy like this!”, slapping me on the back.

I turned my head up to say something, but I couldn’t get any words out.

…Just then, there was a voice from behind me.

“Indeed. To think, when he’s such a good person.”

I knew the voice, of course. I wouldn’t have forgotten it in a day or two.

It would take thirty - three hundred - three thousand years for me to forget.

I turned toward it.
I needed to be sure.
I couldn't have possibly misheard.
But until I saw it myself, I wouldn't believe it.

She chuckled to herself.
"That Miyagi girl really is a good-for-nothing."
Miyagi put her arm around my neck and hugged me.

"I'm back, Mr. Kusunoki. …I was looking for you."
I reflexively hugged her back, smelling her hair. That smell was one with my sense of "Miyagi."
It was indeed her.

I wasn't the only one having trouble digesting the situation. Many of the people around were similarly bewildered and amazed. They were probably thinking, "Wasn't this Miyagi girl supposed to not exist?"
I was stunned into silence when I saw their reaction. Everyone could see Miyagi.

"Might you be Ms. Miyagi?", a man in a jersey timidly asked.
"Yes, I'm the good-for-nothing Miyagi," she answered, and the man slapped me on the shoulder.

“Thank goodness!”, he laughed. “What do you know, she really exists. And you’re really pretty, Ms. Miyagi! I’m jealous!”

But I still didn’t understand what was going on.
Why was Miyagi here? Why could the other people see Miyagi?

“So Ms. Miyagi… really was Ms. Miyagi,” the high school girl said, her eyes wide. “…Yeah, somehow, you’re exactly like I imagined you.”
Asakura, from the back of the crowd, suggested that they let us be alone. So the people left us banter and congratulations as they scattered away.

I thanked Asakura.
“Guess Miyagi really was just my kind of girl,” Asakura laughed. “Be happy, you two.”

And then we were alone.

Miyagi took my hand and explained.
“Strange, isn’t it? How can I be here? How can others see me? …It’s simple. I did the same thing you did.”
“The same thing…?”

A few seconds later, I realized what Miyagi meant.
“How much… did you sell?”
“Also the same. I sold all of it. All but three days.”

My face went pale.

“Just after you sold your lifespan, the other observer contacted me. He told me you’d sold off even more of your life to pay off most of my debt. As soon as I heard that… I was determined. He did the formalities.”

I’m sure I should have be saddened.
The person I had sacrificed everything to protect betrayed my desire and threw her own life away - I should have grieved.

And yet, I was happy.
Her betrayal, her foolishness, was now more dear to me than anything.

Miyagi sat beside and leaned on me.
“Quite impressive, Mr. Kusunoki. Buying back the majority of my life with just thirty days. …And I’m sorry. I threw away the life you worked so hard to get back. I’m such a fool.”
“Fool?”, I said. “I’m the fool. I couldn’t live without you for even three days, Miyagi. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.”
Miyagi laughed happily and pressed her chin on my shoulder.

“Thanks to you, the value of my life went up a bit as well. So not only is the debt paid, there’s plenty of money left. More than we could possibly go through in three days.”

"So we’re rich,” I said grandiosely, hugging Miyagi and shaking

her.
“Yes, we are,” Miyagi replied, doing the same.
Tears poured out again, but so did they for Miyagi, so I didn’t pay it any mind.

I’ll die leaving nothing behind.
Perhaps some curious person might remember me - as a fool, probably - but it’s a lot more likely they’ll forget.

But I don’t mind that.
I don’t need the eternity I once dreamed of now.
I don’t mind if no one remembers me.

Because she’s here with me, smiling at my side.
Just because of that, I can forgive everything else.

“Well, Mr. Kusunoki.”

Miyagi turned back to me with a lovable grin.

“How do you plan to spend these three days?”

I believe those three days,

compared to the tragic thirty years I would have lived,

compared to the worthwhile thirty days I would have lived,

were of much, much more value.

Afterword

They say that a fool can never be cured to his death.
But I like to take a slightly more optimistic view of this.
Something more like “A fool will be cured by the time he’s dead.”

While we call them all fools (or its synonyms), there actually exist many different kinds of fool. The fool I speak of here is the fool who creates his own hell.
What is characteristic of this fool, first of all, is that he is strongly convinced he can never be happy. Made more severe, this conviction can be expanded to become “I shouldn’t be happy,” and ultimately arrive at “I don’t *want* to be happy,” a most destructive misunderstanding.

Once that point is reached, there’s nothing left to fear. These fools become intensely familiar with dissatisfaction, and no matter how blessed their environment, they find some loophole to avoid happiness.
As this is all done subconsciously, they believe this world to be hell - when in actuality, they are just making it hell themselves with every step they take.

I myself am one of those hell-creators, which is why I believe

so, but such fools cannot be cured quickly. To someone who has made being unhappy part of their identity, not being unhappy is losing oneself.
The self-pity they used to endure unhappiness eventually becomes their only enjoyment, and they actively seek out displeasure for that purpose.

However, as I stated at the outset, I believe such fools will be cured by the time they die. To be more exact, my thought is "Just before death, I'm sure they'd be cured."
The lucky ones may get an opportunity to be cured before that actually happens, but even the unlucky, when they realize the inevitability of their death and are freed of the chains of "having to keep living in this world" - finally, then, are they not also freed from their foolishness?

I called this viewpoint optimistic, but looking at it closer, it could be considered quite pessimistic as well. The first time he comes to love the world is when his death is made certain. However, I consider that through the eyes of this "fool who was cured, but too late," everything is hopelessly beautiful. The deeper the regrets and grievances like "To think I lived in such a beautiful world as this," or "Now I'd be able to accept it all and live," the more the world appears to be cruelly beautiful in return.

I'm always thinking about how I want to write on that kind of beauty.

At least here in “Three Days of Happiness,” though it would seem I used the story to speak about the value of life, the power of love and whatnot… to be honest, that was not my intention in the least.

- Sugaru Miaki